

## “Faith Demonstrated Through Testing”

(Part 2)

Heb. 11:8-19

- INTRO. - Of all the people listed in the “Hall of Faith” (in Heb. 11), perhaps there is none greater than Abraham. To this Jewish audience there was no one greater than Abraham. So he is given a great deal of attention in this chapter. From v. 8, all the way down to v. 19, we have this large section on the life of Abraham.
- Abraham is the epitome of biblical faith, and perhaps more than anyone else is a picture of the totality of a life of faith. He is the classic example of what it means to become *justified* by faith – and to *live* by faith.
- But his faith was severely tested. In fact, in this long passage of Scripture we see three ways in which God tested Abraham’s faith. We saw the first one last week.

### I. THE TEST OF WORLDLINESS (vv. 8-10, 13-16)

- We see this first test vv. 8-10 and vv. 13-16. Those two sections are connected with each other in regard to thought. The first test of Abraham’s faith was to obey God’s call to leave his home country and to go to a land that God promised him – even though he did *not* even know where he was going.

- He left his country, his relatives, and his father’s house (in other words, his inheritance) in order to obey God. He left everything that was stable and everything that was known. He went out, *not* knowing where he was going, but he made this trek by faith.

- The moment he understood what God was saying to him, he started packing his bags. It may have taken awhile to get everything ready to actually leave, but from the moment God called him, he was ready to go.

- And the application for us (as Christians today) is that of leaving the old behind and moving forward to a new life in Christ. All the language in this passage is that of a pilgrim, a sojourner, one who is a citizen of a different realm. And the heart of a pilgrim is that of being willing to leave the old behind and move on to the new.

- Of course, the Christian life should be understood as a pilgrimage, from the old pattern of life to a brand new one. Abraham is a picture for us in this regard. We are to leave the old and move on to the new. Salvation always brings separation from the world. God cannot lead us into new ways of living without leading us out of the old ways.

- Worldliness is wanting to live like the rest of the world. And yet, the Word of God declares, “Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” (1 John 2:15)

- The more we grow in Christ the less like the world we will be. The more mature we become in Christ the more we will want what God wants instead of what the world is pursuing.

- We also saw last time that Abraham (and the other Patriarchs) lived by faith as “aliens” (as pilgrims) in the land of promise. They did *not* have permanent dwelling places, but lived in tents.

- Even though the land of Canaan was promised to them, they did *not* own any of it (at this particular time). And this is a powerful reminder that faith often requires waiting. The promises of God do *not* always come about immediately. So Abraham (and the others) had to pass the test of patience.

- We often struggle with that test, because we are used to instant gratification, but this is an important aspect of the life of faith. In fact, God’s promises are not always fulfilled even in this life. This passage tells us that all these died without seeing the fulfillment of the promises. Yet they died in faith, believing that God would still ultimately fulfill them.

- Genuine faith is deaf to doubt, dumb to discouragement, and blind to impossibility. Faith hangs on to the promise no matter how long it takes to see the fulfillment of it.

- And we saw (last time) that Abraham was looking beyond the earthly to the heavenly. Even more than an

earthly city (in the land of promise) “...he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” Not *a* city, but *the* city. This is clearly a reference to the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem.

- It is the city “whose architect and builder is God” Himself. There is only one city like that mentioned in Scripture, but the amazing thing is, Abraham set his heart on it thousands of years before there was even an *earthly* Jerusalem, much less the *new* Jerusalem described by the Apostle John in the Book of Revelation.

- And all this ties in with the “pilgrim language” of this passage, and is a picture we often see in the NT. Paul declared (in Phil. 3:20), “our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ...”

- According to this divinely-inspired revelation, Abraham was looking beyond the *earthly* Promised Land to the *ultimate* Promised Land. This is why he could die, still clinging to the promise. He knew his ultimate destiny, even if he never saw the promise of an earthly land fulfilled.

- Because he believed the ultimate promise was certain, he could be patient with God in the fulfillment of the short term (earthly) promises. And remember our definition of faith in v. 1, “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

- Because the eternal question was settled in Abraham's heart, the earthly questions could remain unanswered. He didn't have to understand everything God was doing in his earthly life, because he was absolutely convinced that all God's promises would be ultimately fulfilled.

- Faith says, "I don't have to know ahead of time what God is going to do, because I trust Him explicitly. I know that whatever He does, it will turn out for my good and His glory."

- And the life of faith trusts God to the degree that if none of His promises are fulfilled in this lifetime, that is OK, because He will ultimately fulfill every promise in eternity.

- Now, we didn't get this far last time, but vv. 13-16 are closely connected in thought with this first test of worldliness. We see the same kind of "pilgrim language" in those four verses.

- Look at it with me, "All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. 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 a city for them."

- The phrase "all these" refers to Abraham and Sarah, as well as Isaac and Jacob. They all died with receiving the Promised Land. In fact, history reveals that it would be nearly 500 years after the death of Jacob that the Israelites would begin taking over the Promised Land.

- But please understand, as John MacArthur explains, "Far from being a lament...this statement is a positive declaration that these [people] died in perfect hope and assurance of [ultimate] fulfillment."

- You see, for a person of faith, God's promises are as good as reality. If God says it, that settles it. And notice, that "all these" were clearly looking beyond the earthly to the heavenly.

- They understood that they would remain "strangers and exiles" as long as they were on the earth. They weren't looking to return to their former homeland (because if that was their goal, they could have gone back there). No, they were completely fixed upon their ultimate heavenly home.

- And think about this – God had *not* given them His timeline as to *when* these covenant promises were to be fulfilled. All they knew was that it was God's promise – and that was enough.

- They got a sampling of the Promised Land, but they never owned it. They walked on it, they pastured their

flocks on it, they raised their children on it, but they remained patient even though they did *not* possess it.

- It was enough for them to possess it “from a distance.” Why? Because they were desiring “a better country, that is a heavenly one.” And in the meantime they saw themselves as “strangers and exiles on the earth.” This was how they saw themselves (and this is how we as Christians should see ourselves).

- And it’s interesting, because these two terms are *not* positive ones. In the ancient world “strangers” (zenoi) were regarded with contempt. They were looked upon with suspicion and even hatred. They had very few rights (in comparison to the citizens of the land).

- The other term, “exiles” is what we would call “refugees” today. It means pilgrims, sojourners, vagabonds. And yet, significantly, it is because of this perspective that “God is not ashamed to be called their God.”

- These are *not* positive terms from a human perspective, but from a divine perspective they absolutely *are*. Listen, the essence of our faith is *not* based on what we can hold in this earthly life. It is based on our ultimate destiny.

- It’s OK to be a refugee in this world. It’s OK to be an “alien,” a foreigner. It’s OK to be despised and seen with suspicion by people in this world. Why? Because this is *not* our ultimate home. We’re just passing through this

place to our eternal city. Our “pilgrim’s progress” is *through* this world *to* our heavenly home.

- By the way, it is interesting to note that the Greek word for “church” literally means “called out ones.” We have been called out from among a world where we do *not* belong.

- As James Draper once wrote, “We have nothing in common with this sinful world and its antagonism, hatred, and atheism. We have nothing in common with a world that is filled with vulgarity, suggestiveness, filth, cursing, and blasphemy against God. That isn’t where our heart is.”

- “We have been called out of that and we, like the patriarchs of old, have eyes of faith with which we can see [that] there is coming a day when the Lord shall return and establish His eternal Kingdom.”

- At that time the promises of God (that we only see dimly now) will be perfectly and completely fulfilled. And we see all that through the eyes of faith. It is as certain as if it had already taken place.

- We have the same kind of faith Paul expressed in 2 Tim. 1:12, when he said, “for I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day.”

- Well, we *must* move on. We need to move on to a second test that Abraham faced, and that is:

## II. THE TEST OF WEAKNESS (vv. 11-12)

- Look with me at v. 11, “By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised; therefore, also, there was born of one man, and him as good as dead at that, as many descendants as the stars of heaven in number, and innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore.”

- Now, that’s the NASB, but it may *not* be the best translation in this particular case. I almost *never* trust the NIV, but in *this* case it may be the one version that gets it right. The NIV reads (in v. 11), “By faith Abraham, even though he was past age-- and Sarah herself was barren-- was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise.”

- We know that v. 12 refers to Abraham, and I believe v. 11 probably does as well. Scholars have long debated this, and there are a number of reasons for seeing a reference to Sarah in v. 11, or to seeing a reference to Abraham (along with Sarah) there.

- But the one factor that seems to make it an ironclad case for Abraham, is the fact that the phrase “received ability to conceive” (in the NASB) literally means “to lay down seed.” Obviously, it is men who do that and *not* women. This clearly points to the father’s part in the process of conception.

- This means that both v. 11 (as well as v. 12) refer to Abraham. So it *could* read as it does in the NIV, or it *could* read, “By faith Abraham, in association with Sarah, received power to lay down seed, even beyond the proper time of life, since he considered Him faithful who had promised.”

- Or it could read (as F. F. Bruce has suggested), “By faith he (Abraham) also, together with Sarah, received power to beget a child even after the natural season of life, because he reckoned the one who gave the promise to be trustworthy.” Verse 12 then follows naturally on the heels of that.

- This also fits better with the reality that Sarah doubted God, and laughed at the idea that she could conceive in her old age. Gen. 18:13ff makes it clear that her laughter was that of unbelief (even though she denied it). No wonder she ended up naming that baby Isaac, which means “laughter.”

- Sarah did *not* really believe God. In fact, she even tried to fulfill the covenant promises herself by giving Abraham her handmaid Hagar to have a child through her. MacArthur writes, “Her idea and Abraham’s acquiescence produced a son, Ishmael, whose descendants from that day to this have been a plague on the descendants of the son of promise. Ishmael became the progenitor of the Arabs and every Jew since his birth has faced the antagonism of the Arab world because of Abraham’s and Sarah’s disobedience.”

- So we would have to say that Sarah's impatience was very costly, but the emphasis in *this* passage is on the faith of the Patriarch Abraham (although Sarah was obviously involved). I believe the message of the author of Hebrews is on the example of the faith of Abraham, and all the ways his faith was tested, and how he passed every test.

- In this case, the faith was Abraham's and *not* Sarah's. It was Sarah (of course) who gave birth to Isaac, but it was Abraham's faith that was the vehicle for that supernatural birth.

- In fact, it is significant to note, that it was in this context (of Abraham believing God for the birth of Isaac) that Gen. 15:6 tells us, "Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness." It is significant that Abraham's justification came at *this* point of his exercise of faith in God.

- This is *not* to minimize Sarah's part in all this. Sarah *is* (in fact) referenced in the original Hebrew text of v. 11, but it is likely that she was in a secondary role as a *recipient* of the result of Abraham's faith. In a very real way, you *could* say that Abraham's faith was the "seed" that enabled Isaac to be conceived.

- But either way, the point (here) is that Abraham passed the test of (physical) weakness. *Both* Abraham *and* Sarah were too old to have children. Gen. 11:30 tells us that Sarah was barren – she had never had a child and was unable to bear children. So it took a great deal of faith to

believe that God would (miraculously) give them a child under those circumstances.

- Of course, from a human standpoint, it was *impossible* for Abraham and Sarah to have a child. In this regard, Abraham's body was as good as dead. But amazingly, God enabled him to have descendants as numerous as the stars in heaven and the sand on the seashore.

- Every Jew that has ever been born is a result of Abraham passing this test of faith. He dared to believe God for the impossible, and the rest is history. God had promised to bless the entire world through him, and he believed that promise.

- And (of course) this is a reminder to us that *all* things are possible with God. Jesus said, "With God all things are possible." That's Matt. 19:26. He said, "All things are possible to him who believes." That's Mark 9:23.

- This emphasizes both the human and divine side – the power of God on the one hand, and the faith of men to believe on the other. But it is the combination of those two elements that enable us to cry out with the Apostle Paul, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me." (Phil. 4:13)

- He reminds us in Eph. 3:20, that He "is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think..." If something is His will, He is more than capable of accomplishing it through us. But it is faith in Him that is

the human trigger. We must emulate Abraham's faith and believe God even for the impossible.

- Over and over again in Scripture we see where human weakness is no limitation for God. In fact, Paul even said, "...when I am weak, then I am strong..." (2 Cor. 12:10) Why is that? Because when we are weak, we are forced to trust in the power of God. When we recognize that we have no ability (in and of ourselves), and put our full faith in God to do what only He can do.

- But we too need to pass the test of weakness. We too need to learn to trust God for the impossible. We too need to live with the same kind of faith Abraham had. (Pause) Well, there is one more test Abraham faced, and that is:

### III. THE TEST OF WILLINGNESS (vv. 17-19)

- Look with me at v. 17, "By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac; and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; it was he to whom it was said, 'In Isaac your descendants shall be called.'"

- This is one of the most incomprehensible occurrences in Scripture – that a man would offer his only son (his son of promise, that had been miraculously born to him in his old age) as a sacrifice to God. There is no doubt that this was Abraham's greatest test – and this was the signal demonstration of his faith.

- He had been tested in the area of his mental reasoning and his physical weakness – but now he would be tested in regard to his heart and soul. Could he surrender to God that which was the most precious thing in his life?

- The account is recorded for us in Gen. 22 and in v. 1 of that chapter we see where God clearly intended this as a test. *There* it says, "Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' And He said, 'Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.'"

- Satan tests men to prove them false, but God tests them to prove them true. We see that in the OT with Job, but we also see it here with Abraham. His obedience proved his faith was real.

- Amazingly, Abraham obeyed and took his only son and was fully prepared to kill him and offer him as a sacrifice to God. And (as you know) God stopped him, and he did *not* have to kill his son, but he would have done it if God had *not* stopped him and provided a substitute.

- And for *us*, this kind of faith is beyond comprehension. How can a father take the life of his own son and offer him up as a sacrifice? I know I can hardly imagine doing something like that.

- ILL. - There is an old story about a man whose job it was to operate a draw bridge over a large river. Every day

he would lower the bridge to allow passenger trains to cross over, and then would raise the bridge to allow ships to go down the river.

One day his wife was sick so he took his son with him to work. The little boy got bored, and so he went out and wondered around, down by the river. After awhile the man heard a cry for help from his son. He had somehow gotten caught in the huge gears that operated the draw bridge.

The man immediately began to run to where the boy was, but all of a sudden he heard the most frightening sound he had ever heard in his life – the sound of an approaching train. He only had seconds to decide. Would he save the life of his son or the lives of those on that passenger train?

With heart-wrenching pain, he knew what he had to do. He went back to the controls and flipped the switch on the draw bridge – covering his ears so he would not hear the deafening cries of his son.

As he looked up, he saw the people on the train going by. Some were waving. Most were laughing and having a good time – *not* knowing that a son had been given to save them.

- And (of course) we cannot help but to tie this in to what God the Father did in the giving of His only begotten Son for us – to die in our place – to be our substitute on the cross of Calvary.

- In Abraham's case, a ram was provided by God as a substitute for his beloved son – but in the case of Jesus no substitute was provided. God the Father actually gave His Son to die on the cross. He was *our* substitute.

- In fact, we're told in v. 19 that this was intended to be a type of Christ's ultimate sacrifice. Heb. 11:19 says, "He considered that God is able to raise men even from the dead; from which he also received him back as a type."

- The word for "type" is the Greek word "parabole" from which we get our word "parable." We've already seen this term in our study of Hebrews. It is something that point to a greater reality. This entire incident is given as a type of God giving His only begotten Son and then raising Him from the dead in order to provide our salvation.

- In the same way that Isaac carried the wood on his back up Mount Moriah, so the Lord Jesus carried the wood of the cross on His back up Mount Calvary. In fact, Jesus Himself said something very interesting about Abraham (in John 8:56). He said, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad."

- And it's significant, Abraham believed in the resurrection from the dead long before God ever revealed this doctrine. He believed this because he knew that this would be the only way God could keep His covenant promise after he had offered up his life. Resurrection was

the only way *both* the command and the promise could be fulfilled.

- In fact, it's interesting, if you go back to the Genesis account, you see that this is what Abraham expected. Gen. 22:5 says, "And Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go yonder; and we will worship and return to you.'"

- Notice the word "we" in that verse. Abraham fully expected God to raise Isaac up from the dead so they could re-join the servants who were watching the donkey.

- But for the purposes of the author of Hebrews, Abraham's faith was proven (beyond any doubt) when he was willing to offer up his only son of promise. It is Abraham's faith that is at center stage. This is the example par excellence of the magnanimous faith of one who truly believes God. Abraham was forced into a radical posture of trusting God.

- Remember, Abraham had waited for many, many years for the promised son to be born. He knew that the fulfillment of God's covenant with him was dependent upon Isaac. God told him, "In Isaac your descendants shall be called."

- He knew this promise was unconditional – and (in fact) offered up his son believing that God could even raise him up from the dead to keep this unconditional promise. In essence he believed that this was God's problem. God

would have to find a way to keep His covenant, even after the death of the promised heir.

- But the point is, that Abraham's faith was so strong that he believed God would supernaturally work it out. If God could perform a miracle to allow his son to be born in the first place, then God could also perform a miracle to bring him back from the dead.

- All he knew was that this is what God had commanded him to do, and therefore he would do exactly what God had dictated. The perfect tense of the verb "offered up" shows that in his heart he had already sacrificed his son Isaac before God stayed his hand.

- Now, we *know* (just from human experience) that this must have been the most difficult decision he ever made. We know it had to tear Abraham's heart out to do something like this. But interestingly, the author of Hebrews does *not* even mention this human struggle. To him, it was a matter of whether he chose to obey God or *not*.

- And amazingly, Abraham passed this incredible test. If Noah demonstrates the *duration* of faith, Abraham demonstrates the *depth* of faith. Abraham passed all three of these phenomenal tests. The question for us is, "How would *we* do with tests like this? How much do *we* trust God?"

- Abraham died to self and to all his ambitions on the day he was tested – he staked his whole life and eternity on

the Word of God. Will we do the same? Do you remember how the NT describes those who follow Christ? Jesus said, “Take up your cross and follow Me.”

- Matt. 16:24 says, “Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.”

- Ron Phillips says, “Faith is willing to go all the way in surrender to Jesus.” Paul put it this way in Rom. 12:1, “I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.”

- Are we truly people of faith? How does our faith measure up to these kinds of tests? Do we insist that we have to know everything in advance? Do we offer up the excuse of weakness in some way? Are we unwilling to give up that which is most precious to us to follow Christ?

- He gave His all for us on Calvary. The knife of sacrifice and the fire of judgement fell on Him as He died on the cross for us. Why would we *not* be willing to put our full faith in Him?

- ILL. – When John Bunyan was put into prison for preaching the gospel, he was mostly concerned about his family. He was particularly grieved over his little daughter who was blind. He had a special love for her. He wrote in his journal, “I saw in this condition I was a man pulling down his house upon the head of his wife and

children. Yet, thought I, I must do it; I must do it. The dearest idol I have known, what err that idol be, help me to tear it from Thy throne and worship only Thee.”

- MAKE APPEAL

- PRAYER