

Hebrews 11:17-19

So far in our studies in Hebrews 11 we have looked at

Verses 1-3, what is faith

Verses 4-7, Abel who worshipped by faith, Enoch who walked by faith and Noah who worked by faith

Verses 8-12, Abraham who set out by faith, not knowing where he was going

We looked at how Abraham lived as a stranger, a resident alien, in the land which God had promised, but which was never actually his.

Verses 13-16 tell us of 5 rich spiritual qualities which characterised the lives of all these people of faith

Their confidence

These people, who had so little spiritual help compared with us, and who did not see the fulfilment of what was promised, nevertheless “greeted it from afar”.

Their witness

They “acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles”. Theirs was not just an attitude of

mind; they spoke about it with the people of their generation. Faith refuses to be silent

Their quest

They were all looking for their homeland, heaven. Simply, that is the home of God, He is their father, and they passionately desire to be where He is. Therefore they are outsiders on this earth.

Their discernment

The man or woman of faith has the ability to discern, not only between good and evil, but between what is permanent and what is perishable. They evaluate material gain, but look for something better. They “desire a better country that is a heavenly one”.

Their security

These pilgrims often endured hardship and deprivation; they were exiles, and exiles were not viewed with favour in the ancient world (Have things changed?) But their security is to be found in God, who is “not ashamed to be called their God”.

And as we look at these people of long ago we find that, like Abel, they, though dead, still speak. They speak to us in our very different world and remind us that the challenge of faith is essentially the same. They challenge our **cowardice** by speaking to their contemporaries and telling them, by their words and lifestyles, that this world is not all that there is; that there is a life beyond this one and that we are accountable to God for how we live our lives here and now. They challenge our guilty silence.

They also rebuke our **materialism**

We are going to make little impact with the gospel if self-contented affluence becomes a feature of our lives rather than outgoing compassion. The early church, inspired by Jesus' example, did all it could to meet the needs of the hungry and destitute; and that was the church which, to quote the words of its opponents, "turned the world upside-down"

This evening we move on to **verses 17-19**, a story of faith facing the ultimate test.

The book of Genesis records **5 occasions where God appeared to Abraham:**

In chapter **12** God called Abraham to follow in faith

In chapter **15** God promised him descendants like the stars in the night sky

In chapter **17** God came to redirect Abraham to the path of faith he had left in his encounter with Hagar

In chapter **18** God appeared to Abraham and Sarah and renewed the promise of a son

Now, in chapter **22**, God tested Abraham with the greatest trial imaginable (VIDEO)

Genesis 22:2 tells us:

Then God said, "*Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains.*"

This was a test of Abraham's devotion to God. Devotion to God is at the heart of his law:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength.”

Does God have the right to demand such devotion? The Bible’s answer to that is a resounding YES. All that we have comes from God and we hold it for him as stewards at his disposal. God tests our hearts in terms of what we are willing to sacrifice for him, and in doing so he also protects us from the idolatry to which we are so prone. Even good things which he gives us, in this case Isaac the child of promise, God demands that we place back into his hands. We hold everything in trust on behalf of the Giver.

This was also a trial of Abraham’s spiritual understanding. Verses 17 and 18 make this point. God had made great promises to Abraham – possession of the land, descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, all nations blessed through him – all of these to be fulfilled through Isaac, whom he was now told to sacrifice.

We can see how vexing and contradictory this must have seemed to Abraham: God’s promise pitted against God’s command. If the promise was to be fulfilled, then Isaac had to live; if God was to be obeyed, Isaac had to die. This was the ultimate test of Abraham’s trust in God. I say this because of the horror of what was involved. Genesis 22:3 reminds us of Abraham’s deep love for his son. The very thought of killing him was awful; much more awful the act of killing him. Obedience required that Abraham trusted God totally. The Genesis story raises some questions for us. “How can a loving God ask anyone to do such a thing?” “How can faith cope when God’s promise and God’s command seem to contradict each other?” “How can faith cope with such a test?”

There are no easy answers to these questions, but I would like to pick out **4 pointers**.

Firstly, faith kneels before God in humble submission.

Abraham must have had a long night before he set out with his son for the place of sacrifice. He must have reflected on the staggering demand God had made, but also on his right to make it. He must have thought how much he loved Isaac, but also how devoted he was to God. He must have realised that he was unable to reason through all the problems and knelt before God and asked for grace to obey.

It is worth noting that this ultimate test of faith occurs towards the end of Abraham's recorded life of faith. Abraham had in the past failed lesser tests, such as the time in Egypt when he pretended that his wife Sarah was really his sister. God had been refining Abraham's faith, and now Abraham must have reached a point where he reckoned that God's will was higher than his will. "Your will be done" – a prayer uttered with tears at the awful thing he was to do.

But this story has tried the faith of many people ever since. Surely this is not a faith that any

decent person would try to copy. How would Abraham respond to that?

Abraham's faith was rooted in humility, he saw himself as the creature standing before the Creator. He would not have taken it upon himself to question or to judge God.

Richard Philips, writing about this says that if we look at God's dealings from a humanist perspective we will never find an answer. By humanist he means the belief, so deeply ingrained in us, that whatever is best for the greatest number of humans here on earth is the yardstick to measure whatever is good. But God is not a humanist! Firstly, God's view of what is good for us is often radically different from what we think is for our good. When God makes that amazing promise in Romans 8:28 that He works all things together for the good of those who love Him", it does not mean that He works all things together for our comfort, or what we think might be good for us. And secondly, in God's view, it is the glory of His name which is most important. The

manifestation of His justice and His love are more important than the stars in the sky. He says:

“Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth.” (Psalm 46:10)

When it comes to such disturbing matters as this command which God gave to Abraham, our humanism will never be satisfied. God however does not intend to satisfy our humanism but to drive it out. God is not going to satisfy our queries in judgement of Him; He will not accept a position on the witness stand. It is only as we kneel before God and respond to Him in obedience that we find answers.

Secondly, as we ask how Abraham resolved his problems and passed the test of faith, we see **that the faith which receives God’s promises must also obey God’s commands.**

Who was faced with the ultimate challenge? The one who had received the promises (verse 17)

The point is that the same faith that receives and relies on God’s word in the promise is obliged to accept God’s word in the command. It is the same God and the same word. You may remember the disasters which befell Job. Job’s wife urged him to complain to God, but Job replied: *“Shall we accept good from God and not trouble?”* By faith we know that the path of blessing is also the path of difficulty and obedience. We cannot pick and choose in the Christian life.

What made things particularly hard for Abraham was that God’s promise (of descendants through Isaac) was contradicted by God’s command (to offer Isaac as a sacrifice). By faith Abraham accepted that somehow, if he followed God’s command, that God would figure out how to deliver the promise. As Christians we find peace in following God’s ways even when we do not understand them. In short, God knows better than we do.

- He has more and better information

- He has an infinitely higher capacity for processing information than we do
- He can do all this without sin. As Christians we recognise that the circuit boards of our mental computers are heavily infected by a virus called sin.

Thirdly, while faith obeys without answers, faith also gains understanding through God's word.

Abraham had already learned so much about God on his walk of faith. He knew that if the promise was to be fulfilled, then Isaac had to live. So he believed that God would bring Isaac back to life. (Hebrews 11:19) We find that faith implied in the Genesis story when Abraham says to the servants to stay where they were.

“We will worship and then we will come back to you.”

The long wait for a son, the knowledge that Sarah was past child-bearing age, all of his experience had persuaded Abraham that God had power over life and death. God was the giver and the taker of life.

Abraham did not have the written word of God, but he did have experience of God working in his life. We have both the written word and the experience of God's power in our lives, and we can continue to know God even better as we respond to Him in faith and obedience.

Fourthly, Abraham was able to obey because he knew and trusted God. Over the years he had seen God at work in many ways and had come to see what God was like.

This does not mean that it was easy for Abraham. He must have died a thousand deaths as he and Isaac approached Mount Moriah. But it does mean he was able to obey by faith.

Abraham knew that God was

- Holy, therefore his motives are holy
- Almighty, therefore nothing lies beyond His ability to save
- Good, and that's why he “works in all things for the good of those who love Him

“Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead”, and a God like that was worth trusting

The parable of the offered son

Verse 19 concludes our passage by saying *“And figuratively speaking Abraham did receive Isaac back from death.”* Interestingly, the Greek text reads: *“And as a parable Abraham did receive Isaac back from death”*. Christians have for a long time seen the sacrifice of Isaac as illustrating and pointing forward to the death of Jesus.

Abraham was a father asked to sacrifice his son. Does that not remind us of God who *“loved the world so much that he gave his only son?”*

Isaac carried wood for the offering, just as Jesus carried the cross

And Isaac’s question *“Where is the lamb?”* is a question which Jewish worshippers must have asked so often in the centuries before Christ came. Those who really thought about their act of worship in offering a lamb must have realised that the lamb was a symbol and could not in itself take away sin. And then finally there appears John the Baptist who emerges

from the desert and one day sees Jesus approaching and calls out

“Look! The lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”

No more need for animal sacrifices.

We have seen that the highest good is God’s glory. But in the cross we find that God’s glory is also the source of our good, namely our redemption and our forgiveness.

Therefore, when God tests our devotion to him, or brings us to a place where all we can say is *“Your will be done”*, let us remember Jesus who faced death on the cross with these very words on his lips. The God who tests our faith is the God who has bought for us a costly redemption, salvation at the price of his son’s life. Although we do not have perfect understanding of all the issues we have been looking at this evening, let us rejoice in the One who *“humbled Himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross.”*