
The Power of Faith in the Face of Death

Hebrews 11:17-22

Introduction Faith has a great focus on the future. It hears and embraces what God promises and leans toward God's promises. But there is an unalterable fact about everyone's future. That fact is death. So, how will faith behave when facing difficulty, decline and death?

We noted that the author is challenging the believers to persevere by faith. They were to be vigilant in the temptation to sin and joyous in the trails of suffering. Many of them were facing the great testing of suffering death. Violent, painful death may have visited the congregation leaving chairs empty. These were a constant reminder of the danger facing them.

So in the author's catalog of faith's examples, he now brings forward several who demonstrate the power of faith in the face of death. From these we are to draw courage, conviction and confidence that God's promises will sustain us and His purposes will direct us.

We must continue to believe God in ways that clearly shows that we are treasuring His promises.

Faith Obeying God's Precepts (v.17-19)

Here is faith in the face of what seems like an impossible command, "Go and sacrifice your son." What will Abraham do? Will his faith in God's promises cause some kind of tension or difficulty when God calls for real obedience?

The Trial that Examines Faith (v.17-18)

We see that this is test, a trial. It is God moving to examine Abraham's heart. As James 1 says, these kinds of tests often will involve temptations. God is testing – but it is almost certain that in the testing by God, Abraham was tempted to disobey God. The rationalization would have been easy. He could have said to himself, "Human sacrifice is immoral. God would either never command it or the test here is whether I will not do what I know is wrong even when I think God is commanding it." Many reading the Old Testament come to this story with a real sense of shock. God has asked Abraham to sacrifice a human.

Without trying to answer all the objections that people raise, let me point out that human sacrifice is wrong because God said so, not because there is some moral principle outside of God that He governs according to. So if God commands Abraham to sacrifice a human, then Abraham must obey God at this point over this command.

Another interesting thing that we find in the Old Testament account in Genesis 22:1-10 is a lack of turmoil and anguish. We do not see him wrestling with his decision. He gets up early in the morning. He loads up the donkey, gets the servant and the boy, and heads off on a three day journey to where God sends him. We know that he has settled in his mind what he believes and how he will obey before he moves on with

just boy. He turns to the servant and says, “Wait here. I and the lad will go and come again to you.” You wait; we will go; we will sacrifice; we will return.

Now, we need to think carefully about the testing of Abraham. By faith, when tested, Abraham obeyed. So what was this really a test of?

It was a test of Abraham’s *treasure*.

Would he sacrifice what was nearest and dearest to his heart? Most of us can feel this in some way. Here is your favorite child, the son of your old age, the center of your hopes and dreams – and you must give him up. Not that he is going to just leave and go out on his own. Not that he is going off to college. No, he is being taken and sacrificed.

Here is what God is testing: where is Abraham’s greatest treasure – is it God or is it Isaac? We all know child centered homes and people. Their children are their greatest treasures. It is evident because of what they will sacrifice and give up for their sake. It is evident from the trade-offs and compromises they make. It is evident from the emotions that boil up when their child is hurt, or challenged, or thwarted in some way.

Family and children can be enormous treasures and they can become disobedience fueling idols. Yet here Abraham moves with a sense of sure poise. He simply rises up to obey God. So will we obey God when what we really treasure is being tested? Will we make the right choices that at times will look simply like having certain priorities?

It was a test of Abraham’s *trust*.

Would he sacrifice what was clearly the promised one that God had given? Remember, Isaac is not just any child. He is the promised son. He is the one that he and Sarah had waited long years for. He is the direct result of the miraculous intervention of God through Abraham and Sarah’s faith. Sometimes faith is a matter of trusting in God, and sometimes it is a matter of trusting God.

Let me illustrate. If you are getting ready to take a 3 week vacation and do a driving tour of the United States, one question you will probably ask is, “Do I trust my car? Will it do the job?” Another way to think of this is when you are approaching a strange dog, a big, fierce some, growling dog. Do you trust that dog. It is in this sense that I think we often fail. We say we trust in God so we believe in Him – but we are not so sure that all points, we trust Him, we believe that He knows what He is doing. So, does Abraham trust God? Abraham’s obedience by faith is visible, is displayed through the test. Even more, the test is the opportunity for faith’s obedience.

When we are being tested and tried (and we all are), will we patiently persevere with confidence and commitment to God’s promises? I do not know what the test may be. It may be dramatic and public. It may come as just another choice in the stream of life. Or it may be played out in the quiet battlefield of home or heart.

We will all be tested and tried. Our character, our likeness to Christ is shaped by the sharp application of the chisel of testing under the hammer of hardship. But it

is guided by the Master Craftsman who is lovingly working to produce magnificent works of grace.

The Trust that Exhibits Faith

(v.19)

Abraham's faith *reasoned*.

He had God's promise and God's precept. The only thing that Abraham could figure out was that God would have to raise Isaac from the dead. His faith, his belief had God's promise of Isaac. And his faith had God's command to sacrifice him. So his faith reasoned based on the faithfulness of God, on His integrity and His covenant keeping character. Since this son (not another one) was the son of promise and obedience would end that life, then faith rested in the life giving, resurrecting power of God.

Beloved, we need to recognize that true faith *reasons*. It hears what God says, believes what God promises, is poised to obey what God requires and then launches out with a well-reasoned argument from the Word of God. Faith is not the suspension of our minds; it is the use of them to argue in trust from God's Word towards obedience and submission.

Abraham's faith *received*.

His sacrificial obedience became the essence and evident reality of the sacrificial death of one who was yet to come. Our author speaks of Abraham figuratively receiving Isaac back from the dead. Abraham's faith and trust in God were so strong that his obedience before the sacrifice had the essence and evidence, had the confidence in God and the conviction of the resurrection, something he had never seen so that he received his son back as if from the grave.

Think over the areas in which you know you are being tested? Do you believe God's promises and obey God's commands? Has God been at work over the last few days, weeks or months to show you things in your life where you treasure something or someone too much? Maybe one way to begin thinking about this is to answer this question: where in choices do I feel a tension in priorities? Where am I making a compromise in one thing in order to gain something in another? The answer may point to where God is at work to help you treasure Him above all things and trust Him in the midst of anything.

Faith Anticipating God's Purposes

(v.20-22)

In the next part of the paragraph is faith in the face of impending death. All three of these people do what they do on their deathbeds because they have heard, believed and embraced God's promises. Faith here is not being tested, but is banking on the facts of God's promises to say and do things that please God.

The Pattern They Left

Isaac blessed seeing the person who would inherit the land. The blessing he inherited from Abraham he passed on to Jacob. His focus is on the *great provision* of God (Genesis 27:27-29). By faith, this dim sighted, near death patriarch, being deceived by a sinful son, serves God's hidden purposes and blesses the younger instead of the older. His blessing is simply a transmission of God's promise to Abraham to his son. He does so because he believes what God has said. What he says in the blessing highlights that God is one who provides.

Jacob blessed seeing the blessing that would come in the land. In Joseph's place, he blesses his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. His focus is on the *sure protection* of God (Genesis 48:15-16). God has been His shepherd and his sustainer his whole life. Believing that God is like this and will keep his promises, he anticipates the fulfillment and blesses accordingly.

Joseph left instructions seeing that they actually would enter the land. His focus is on the *delivering promises* of God (Genesis 50:24-25). Here, Joseph's faith believes that Egypt is not the homeland. He is so convinced of what God has promised and so confident that God will bring it to pass that he makes them promise to carry his bones out and to bury them in Canaan. So in the face of death, God's promises are so real that he binds future generations to a promise of their own.

The Principles We Learn

- Physical weakness need not be a deterrent to strong faith. All of these men were failing physically: they were blind, weak and frail. Yet, they believed God and acted on His promises.
- Overwhelming difficulty cannot thwart the purposes of God. Neither the sinning of Jacob nor the exile in Egypt can keep God from doing what He has said.
- God-exalting worship should be framed and fueled by the blessings and promises of God gripping our souls.
- God was not ashamed to be these people's God because by faith they anticipated in practical ways the purposes of God. Their faith heard God's promises and moved them to act. God was pleased.

Conclusion

- Faith obeys God regardless. When we say we have faith and continue to live faithless lives, we are fooling ourselves.
- Faith sacrifices for God. When we believe God, sacrificial service will be demanded in testing.
- A believer's faith can reason through the problems of obedience in the face of the promises of God.
- Faith can see what God has promised and act on it, even when it will be not be realized before death.
- Faith worships God as the highest prize and worthiest treasure and sought for reward.

