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Hebrews #33

Was it an Act of Faith, or Unconscionable Stupidity?

Hebrews 11:17-22

Romans 4:16-25

The purpose of Hebrews 11 is to encourage us in our own personal journeys of faith. As our author said in Hebrews 10:36, “you have need of *endurance*,” and as he will say yet again in Hebrews 12:1, “let us run with *endurance* the race that is set before us.” To endure in the face of pressure, persecution, suffering, and general laziness, we need faith, the sort of faith that is modeled for us in the many people noted in Hebrews 11. Today we are going to look closely at what may well be the two most stunning examples of faith in this remarkable chapter.

Faith to Conceive

The first of these two expressions of faith is found in both Abraham and Sarah and concerns the conception and birth of Isaac long after their bodies were capable of reproducing.

We read about it in Hebrews 11:11-12, but I want us to think about this in light of what Paul wrote in **Romans 4:17-21**. There Paul describes Abraham as putting his faith in the God “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, ‘So shall your offspring be.’ He did not weaken in faith when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised” (Rom. 4:17b-21).

Look closely at the description of God in v. 17. He is portrayed as the God “*who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.*” Some believe this refers to God’s creative activity by which he called the world into existence out of nothing. But I think it’s more likely that this phrase “relates to God’s promise to summon nations and descendants from Abraham where none existed. The promise that Abraham believed . . . was that God would grant him descendants, and thus the point of this second clause in verse 17 is that Abraham trusted that God could effectively call these descendants into existence, even though they did not yet exist. Paul is interested not so much in the past creative work of God as in faith in God’s future work to produce a worldwide family for Abraham” (Schreiner, 237).

There’s an important lesson for us here. There is a world of difference between *denying* your circumstances and *defying* them. Abraham never *denied* his circumstances, but he did *defy* them. Faith is not convincing yourself that things don’t exist when they do, or that things do exist when they don’t. The Bible never calls on us to ignore reality. Rather, it calls on us to put our faith in

the Lord of reality. In other words, faith doesn't declare the circumstances and natural barriers to be non-existent. Faith simply declares that God is not shackled by them as we are.

The phrase translated in v. 20, "no unbelief made him waver," has also been translated as "he did not *doubt*." Doug Moo points out that "*to doubt* is a fair translation as long as it is realized that the doubt meant is not a passing hesitation but a more deep-seated and permanent attitude of distrust and inconsistency in relationship to God and His promises" (290). After all, it says in Genesis 17:17 that when told by God he would have a child with Sarah he "fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, 'Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?'" Thus Paul is not denying the presence of at least some degree of doubt in Abraham's heart, but is focusing on the overall, settled disposition of his trust in what God has said. After all, though Abraham was a great man, he was still a sinful man.

Note that there are two clauses in vv. 20-21 that modify the statement that Abraham "grew strong in his faith." That is to say, Paul describes two ways by which Abraham's faith was strengthened. First, he grew strong in faith "***as he gave glory to God.***" Worshiping God, that is to say, ascribing honor and praise to him as the one who alone has the ability to fulfill his seemingly impossible promises, actually generates stronger faith in our hearts. By faith we acknowledge God as all-powerful and true to his word, which in turn nurtures an even greater measure of faith in his ability to perform what he has promised. We'll see this yet again when it comes to Abraham's offering up of Isaac on the altar.

Second, he grew strong in faith being "***fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised***" (v. 21). The full assurance in Abraham's faith came from his ***contemplating the power of God.*** Meditating on God's omnipotence intensifies our confidence in him and deepens our assurance in the certainty of his word.

Without question, this was a remarkable display of faith on the part of both Abraham and Sarah. But it pales in comparison with what comes next.

Faith to Sacrifice

At one level and from a certain angle, what God commanded Abraham to do strikes us as utterly preposterous, morally reprehensible, undeniably unthinkable, and altogether destructive of the very purpose and promise which God had earlier given to him.

Let me briefly remind you of what has happened in the OT narrative concerning Abraham. As we've already seen, God spoke clearly to both Abraham and Sarah when he promised that notwithstanding their old age, notwithstanding their physical inability to conceive and give birth to a child, that is precisely what would happen. Listen again to the divine promise:

And God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will

bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.” Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, “Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” And Abraham said to God, “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!” God said, “No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year” (Gen. 17:15-21).

This puts the story into an entirely different light. It’s one thing for God to command Abraham to offer up a human sacrifice. But for God to command that he sacrifice Isaac, the one of whom God said “I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him” is something else altogether. How can this be?

The sentence of death pronounced on Isaac seemed also to be the sentence of death on God’s promise! There seem to be here two mutually exclusive declarations by God. ***On the one hand, God says: “I will establish my covenant with Isaac.” On the other hand, God says: “Kill Isaac.”*** Can you now appreciate the seemingly insurmountable and illogical predicament in which Abraham finds himself?

If Abraham had been weak in faith he would have had serious doubts whether two statements, which appeared to be contradictory, could possibly have come from the same God. And if they did, can such a God be trusted or obeyed?

But in faith, he reasoned like this:

“Here is one ***promise*** that comes from the heart of my great and glorious God. Yet here is a ***command*** that if obeyed will surely undermine and destroy the promise. What shall I do? I will obey the command. After all, it has come from the heart of the one that I know beyond all doubt is good and great and wise and never fails to fulfill his word or promise. God himself obviously knows what he has asked me to do. He’s not oblivious to the apparent contradiction. I don’t have to point out to him what appears to be an inconsistency. I have complete faith that, in ways that transcend my mind, he can remain good and fulfill his word to me. If need be, he can certainly reanimate and resurrect the smoldering ashes of my son’s body in order to fulfill the covenant promises through him.”

This was a challenge to faith unlike anything else in this eleventh chapter of Hebrews. As difficult as it may have been for Noah to believe that God called him to build an ark because of a massive flood that was coming, it pales in comparison with what God is now asking Abraham.

And leaving Ur of the Chaldeans for a strange and unknown land was a walk in the park when set alongside the command that he execute his son.

But evidently Abraham recognized from the start that what was for him an insoluble problem was no problem at all for God. I doubt if Abraham had a clue how God was going to pull it off. I doubt if he had any idea at all how God could utter two seemingly contradictory statements and remain true and good and righteous. But there is one thing he obviously understood with crystal clarity: God is omnipotent, which is to say there is no limit to his power; and God is omniscient, which is to say he knows everything past, present, and future; and God is always good and righteous and therefore will always be faithful to what he has promised to us.

With that in mind, Abraham ascended the hill with Isaac, fully assured and unwavering in his faith that God would someone pull it off.

Before we look at Abraham's response to God's command, let's note carefully how he did **not** respond.

(1) "Lord, would you mind running that by me one more time? Lord, I would actually prefer that you put it in writing so if at any time in the future people ask me how I could have done something so incredibly immoral and stupid I can point to your signature on the page." No, there was no hesitation on Abraham's part; no bargaining with God; no follow-up questions seeking clarification as to what God really meant by the command.

(2) "Lord, why don't you pick on someone else for once! Just get off my back!"

(3) "Lord, why?" At no time did Abraham ask God to justify his words. At no time did Abraham say, "God, I'm willing to do this if you'll just provide me with a bit more explanation about how you plan on making all this work in conformity with your promises."

(4) "Lord, I'll do what you say, if . . ." In other words, Abraham put no conditions on his obedience.

(5) "Lord, no! I simply won't do it."

The pressure on Abraham must have been unimaginably intense. Consider several factors that would have contributed to make this decision indescribably agonizing.

First, there was the natural revulsion at the prospect of losing one's own son. Anytime we suffer the loss of a family member, it is devastating. Even when the one who dies is old and has lived a long and very fulfilling life, we still feel the pain of loss. But to lose a child is in a category all to itself. Nothing can compare with the pain of having to bury a son or daughter.

Second, there was in Abraham's case the pain and heartache at the prospect of losing the son for whom he had a special love. Listen to how God said it in Genesis 22:2 – "He [God] 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.'" It's almost as if God is intensifying the test and even rubbing it in a bit by reminding him of just how precious Isaac is to his heart: he is the son "whom you love."

Third, there was the fear and agony at the prospect of losing the son of his old age. The fact that both Abraham and Sarah were beyond child-bearing years when she conceived must have endeared Isaac to their hearts beyond what would have been true of a regular birth during that season of life when a couple would have been ordinarily fertile.

Fourth, as if it weren't enough that he was about to lose his own son, the son whom he loved, the son of his old age, there was *the horror of his son dying by his own hand!* It's one thing to be told by God that your precious child will die prematurely of a heart attack or from cancer or in some battle with the enemies of Israel. But for God to tell Abraham that Isaac will die beneath Abraham's own hand is simply more than one can fathom. It's one thing if Abraham had said: "If you're going to take him from me, please do it quickly and out of my sight. I can't bear the thought of watching him suffer." It's something else altogether when God says: "Yes, I'm going to take him from you. And you are the one who will put him to death. It will be by your hand."

Fifth, adding to the emotional anguish of the responsibility placed on Abraham is the fact that Isaac is described in Hebrews 11:17 as Abraham's "*only son.*" This word translated "only" is the Greek word that elsewhere is rendered "only-begotten." This does not mean that Abraham didn't have other children. He was the father of Ishmael by Hagar and of others by Keturah. The word "only" or "only-begotten" ought to be translated something like, "*special*" or "*unique*" or "*irreplaceable.*" He was, after all, the son of the covenant in and by whom the fulfillment of God's promises would come. Remember that in Genesis 21:12 God had clearly said: "through Isaac shall your offspring be named." But Isaac was not yet married, much less was he the father of a single child.

Sixth, Abraham was keenly aware of the sanctity of life. He obviously knew what God had commanded Noah following the great flood. In Genesis 9:6 God said: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image." Human life is precious; so precious that the premeditated murder of one person requires that the perpetrator himself be put to death. Did Abraham wrestle in his thoughts with this?

Seventh, what must Sarah have thought? Nothing in the narrative of Genesis 22 indicates that she was aware of what God had commanded Abraham. Perhaps he said nothing to her about where he was going and what he was about to do. But if he did inform her, what might her response have been? And if she had protested, lacking the faith that Abraham experienced, it would only have increased the burden on his heart. After all, Isaac was her son too!

There has been considerable speculation among those who study the Bible as to what Abraham must have been thinking. Much of it is unjustified. Some is undoubtedly true. But one thing is for sure: Abraham never wavered in his belief that if God really intended him to carry through with the sacrifice of his son, he would most assuredly raise him back from the dead. Of course, we read this in Hebrews 11:19 – “He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.”

That the author of Hebrews is not reading into the OT story something not there is clear from Genesis 22:5 – “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*.’” Whatever was to happen on that mountain, Abraham never questioned or doubted that God’s promise to raise up a glorious posterity through Isaac would be fulfilled.

There is yet another word in that OT narrative that warrants our consideration. Abraham told his servants to wait with the donkey: “I and the boy will go over there and worship . . .” ***Worship?*** Abraham, are you nuts? This God of yours has just commanded you to commit an atrocity of unimaginable horror and you still believe he is worthy of your worship? Evidently so!

I wonder if it might just be that Abraham drew strength and solidified his resolve to obey God by turning his thoughts to who God is and celebrating and extolling him. Could it be that it is in the act of worship, of thinking about God’s greatness and goodness and grace, that we discover our faith growing more solid and stable and sincere? Could it be that it is in our experience of encountering God in worship that he reminds us of who he is and how he is faithful in every circumstance and thus is worthy of our devotion? Could it be that it is primarily in the soul thanking God and praising God and enjoying God that God in turn fills us with renewed resolve and dedication to everything he has commanded? Yes.

There are three other things here in Hebrews 11:19 that deserve our attention.

(1) Note the word translated “*considered*” (11:19a). This is the same word used in Romans 6:11 and 8:18 where Paul describes himself as “reckoning” or calculating on the basis of firm evidence. In Romans 8:18 Paul said, “For I *consider* that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”

This word “consider”, both in Romans and here in Hebrews 11, doesn’t mean to “guess” or to “hope” or to “wish”. It means that after taking into consideration all the facts, it makes perfectly good sense to come to this particular conclusion. Paul “reckoned” or “considered” that the glory to come made suffering in this life worthwhile precisely because he had seen that glory! He tells us in 2 Corinthians 12 how he had been translated into the third heaven and was shown majestic and glorious things that he’s not allowed to repeat.

So, when Abraham “considered” or “reckoned” that God was able to raise Isaac from the dead and thus remain faithful to the promise he had made, it means that ***Abraham had prior***

experience with God and knowledge of God that made this a reasonable act on his part. We don't know all that informed Abraham's decision, but surely at minimum he must have often reflected on how Isaac was conceived in the womb of Sarah. In other words, *if God was able to bring Isaac into existence through the bodies of a 90 year-old woman and a 100 year-old man, why would it be so difficult for him to bring him back to life after he died?*

(2) Note also that he says, *"figuratively speaking"* God did raise him from the dead. What this means is that, in Abraham's mind, when God spoke and forbade him from thrusting the knife into his son's neck, it was as if he were truly raised from the dead. Isaac was as good as dead, as far as Abraham was concerned. Thus in a sense he genuinely received him back from the dead. But since Isaac didn't literally die, our author says it was only in a "figurative" sense in which he came back to life.

(3) The third thing to observe here is that this word translated "figuratively" likely points to the fact that the experience of Abraham and Isaac on Mt. Moriah was *a foreshadowing or prefiguring of the experience of God the Father and Jesus Christ, God the Son, on Calvary.* Isaac and his deliverance from death are parabolic or symbolic or typological of the death and resurrection of Jesus! Consider the ways in which these two incidents are parallel:

- The love of Abraham for Isaac is a portrait, in miniature, as it were, of the love of God the Father for his Son, Jesus Christ.
- Just as Abraham, the father, was to be the executioner of his son Isaac, so also it was God the Father who put to death his Son, Jesus Christ. In Isaiah 53:6b we read that "the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." Again, in Isaiah 53:10a we read, "Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief."
- Don't overlook the obedience of Isaac in this affair. He was not a child, but a young man of age who could have resisted and overcome his father, Abraham, had he wanted to. But he yielded to his father's choice. So, too, the Son of God, Jesus Christ, willingly and voluntarily gave himself up on the cross. No one forced his hand. He did it out of love.
- Finally, might it be also that Isaac not only typifies Jesus, but also you and me? In other words, we are the ones who deserve to be slain for our sin, but God in grace provides a substitute for us to die in our place: Jesus. Just as Isaac was removed from the altar and a sacrificial lamb was placed there in his stead, so we are removed from the cross of God's wrath and Jesus is placed there in our stead!

Conclusion

There are countless lessons for us to learn from this story. Here are a few.

First, we must take note of the *time* of Abraham's testing. It came only as he got older. As someone once said, "it is not the raw recruit, but the scarred veteran, who is assigned a place in the front ranks in the battle" (A. W. Pink). This doesn't mean that younger Christians won't face tests and trials and temptations. Of course they will. What it means is that we who have been Christians for a long time must never think that the battle is behind us, as if because of our age God is going to let us coast into the eternal kingdom. Never think that God is finished with you and there is no test left for you to face. It may even be that the challenges increase and intensify the older we grow in our faith in God.

Second, notice also that the trial of Abraham came not only when he was old but when he was most *happy and prosperous*! Abraham had endured a lot. He had been greatly blessed by God. He was wealthy. He had witnessed the miraculous birth of a son through whom the covenant promises were to be fulfilled. Yet, it was precisely then that this most horrific and painful of all challenges came his way. Do you remember Job? It was precisely at that time when Job was most pleasing to God that the Lord permitted Satan to afflict him almost to the point of death.

Third, this story tells us that when circumstances that only confuse and puzzle us arise, only faith can provide a solution.

Fourth, some of you are likely at a crossroads in life, facing a challenge from God that feels like the end of your dreams. You sense that he is telling you to stay in your marriage in spite of the fact that your spouse is unfaithful and unbelieving and unbearably difficult to live with. For others of you it is the call of God to remain single so that you can more faithfully and fully devote all your time to his service. For some it may be that God is calling you to stay in a job you hate, a job that feels so unfulfilling, so fruitless, a job that you are convinced will take you nowhere. Others are sensing God saying that you should leave a job for something different, something strange, something that doesn't appear to be nearly as rewarding or fulfilling as where you currently work.

There may even be a few who are sensing God's call to go to the nations, to leave family and friends and the comforts of western society for what you know not what. All that you might be called to give up feels like the sacrifice of Isaac. And you must answer the question that is eating away at your soul: Do I believe God is good and wise and can be trusted with my life? Do I believe that obedience to him is worth more than all the riches and comforts in life here in Oklahoma City, or wherever you may live? It is the challenge of faith, and we all face it in varying degrees and circumstances, no less so than did Abraham.

But perhaps the most important thing we learn from this story has been identified by F. B. Meyer:

"Can you not see the old man slowly gathering the stones, bringing them from the furthest distance possible; placing them with reverent and judicious precision; and binding the wood with as much deliberation as possible? But at last everything is

complete; and he turns to break the fatal secret to the young lad who had stood wondering by. Inspiration draws a veil over that last tender scene – the father’s announcement of his mission; the broken sobs; the kisses, wet with tears; the instant submission of the son, who was old enough and strong enough to rebel if he had had the mind. Then the binding of that tender frame; which, indeed, needed no compulsion, because the young heart had learned the secret of obedience and resignation. Finally, the lifting him to lie upon the altar, on the wood. Here was a spectacle which must have arrested the attention of heaven. Here was a proof of how much mortal men will do for the love of God. Here was an evidence of child-like faith which must have thrilled the heart of the Eternal God, and moved Him in the very depths of His being. Do you and I love God like this? Is He more to us than our nearest and dearest? Suppose they stood on this side, and He on that side: would we go with Him, though it cost us the loss of all? You think you would? Aye, it is a great thing to say. The air upon this height is too rare to breathe with comfort. The one explanation of it is to be found in the words of our Lord: ‘He that loveth father or mother, son or daughter, more than Me, is not worthy of Me’” (F. B. Meyer, 177).