

“Abraham: Faith Thinking”

Hebrews 11:17-19

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Back in the 90’s over 1000 self-described immortals gathered for a conference on immortality in Scottsdale, AZ. The leader of the group, Charles Paul Brown, claimed that if a person believed strongly enough, he/she could avoid death. He told the 30,000 people on his mailing list, “If we think we will not die, we will not die.” A year later a number of those who attended the conference had died. At that point Brown insisted that those individuals were all terminally ill before they joined the movement. However, as the years have gone by, many more of these “immortals” have succumbed to mortality.

Folks, I would call these people the ultimate “positive thinkers.” “Just believe you won’t die, and you won’t.” In recent decades, really for three generations, many in the American church have embraced some form of positive thinking theology promoted by Norman Vincent Peale, Robert Schuller, and Joel Osteen. I have never been a fan and agree with the fellow who said, “I find Paul appealing, and Peale appalling.” (That was actually Adlai Stevenson.) However, I do admit that positive thinking can have some value. It is certainly good to be optimistic. Yet, positive thoughts, by themselves, cannot change reality. And I think there is an approach that is far better. I call it “Faith Thinking.”

It is the type of perspective exemplified in our text today by a man name Abraham. This summer we have been studying Hebrews 11 and touring what I call the Faith Hall of Fame. Today we come to the fourth section of the Abraham exhibit, which is Hebrews 11:17-19. My hope is that as we look at God’s word, we will see how Abraham’s faith impacted his thinking, and that the Lord will grant us the desire and ability to become faith thinkers as well. Let’s pause and pray that would happen today.

Hebrews 11:17-18 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.”

The writer takes us back to Genesis 22, one of the most memorable stories in the entire Old

Testament. Incidentally, there is a movie out about Abraham and Isaac called “His Only Son.” Since I have not seen it, I will have to stick to the Bible’s version of the story. A few weeks ago, we talked about how God promised to give Abraham a multitude of descendants. Exactly how that was to happen was somewhat of a mystery, but then in Genesis 21, when Abraham is 100 years old, and Sarah is 91, their son Isaac is born. Isaac is the heir God promised. Through him, Abraham would become the father of many nations.

But **Genesis 22:1 Some time later God tested Abraham.** Many think this is when Isaac is maybe 7-8 years old. **God said to him, “Abraham!” “Here I am,” he replied.** Abraham is not hearing voices. This is a real conversation with the Lord. **Genesis 22:2 The God said, “Take your son, your only son, whom you love – Isaac- and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.”**

The Lord is testing Abraham. He really has no intention of having Isaac killed, but Abraham doesn’t know that. It is hard to imagine a more difficult dilemma. Abraham loves God. He wants to please the Lord. Yet, God asks him to do something horrible; sacrifice his own son. Kill him. Abraham’s heart must have been ripped in two. He loves God and he loves Isaac. It now appears he must choose between God and his own son. That is certainly not a choice I would want to make, and I don’t expect you would either.

Yet, that is just the tip of the iceberg for Abraham. His problem is much deeper. For years Abraham’s life has focused on the promise God had given him. “You will be a great nation. Through you all the nations of the earth will be blessed. Through Isaac, your descendants will be as numerous as stars in the sky or grain of sand on the seashore.” Yet, Isaac is just a boy. He has no children, no descendants. If Isaac dies now, how can God’s promise ever be fulfilled? It just doesn’t make sense that God would tell Abraham to sacrifice his son. Yet, Abraham knows this is what God has said. So, besides the emotional trauma of choosing between God and Isaac, Abraham also experiences a great deal of confusion as he attempts to make

sense out of an incredible command. And on top of all that he feels a deep stab of fear, because it seems his God given dream of being the father of a great nation is about to die. As Matthew Henry said in a commentary, “No creature has even been given a heavier burden to bear.”

Yet, Abraham chooses to do just what God commanded. Genesis 22:3 says “early the next morning” he takes Isaac, and they begin their fateful journey. Along the way, Isaac asks a heart-wrenching question: **Genesis 22:7,8 “Father?” “Yes, my son?” Abraham replied. “The fire and wood are here, “ Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went on together.**

Now, based on our text, Hebrews 11, I don’t think Abraham really believed what he told Isaac. As we will see, Abraham’s hope is not that God would provide a substitute offering, but rather that He would raise Isaac from the dead. Because he could not bear to tell him the truth, Abraham tells Isaac what he thinks is a lie. When they reach their destination, Abraham builds an altar, ties Isaac to the top, and just as he is ready to plunge a knife into his son, **Genesis 22:11, 12 The angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, “Abraham!” “He I am,” he replied. “Do not lay a hand on the boy,” he said. “Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”** And sure enough **22:13, 14 Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place The Lord Will Provide. And to this day it is said, “on the mountain of the Lord it will be provided.”** Then the Lord reaffirms His promise to Abraham: **Genesis 22 17,18 I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed because you have obeyed me.”**

What a powerful story! And it is not a myth or fairy tale. As Francis Schaeffer used to say, “It happened in space and time.” It is real history. Yet, the faith hall of fame in Hebrews 11 is not just a museum

where we can view the faith of people who lived a long time ago. It is a place where my faith and your faith can grow. Today the focus is on how Abraham’s faith was strengthened by his thinking. Let’s look at how we can be Faith Thinkers too.

Number 1, To be a Faith Thinker we must obey God, even if we don’t understand why He has given us a particular command. As someone said, “When God puts a period, we must not try to change it to a question mark.” I believe the purpose of every one of God’s commands is His glory and our ultimate good. He never tells us to do or not do something because He wants to be mean to us. It is always to our ultimate benefit to obey God.

Yet sometimes it takes a while for us to see that. And sometimes we will not be able to understand how that is true until we get to heaven. Yet, like Abraham, if you are confident God has told you to do something you need to obey, even if you don’t yet understand the why of the command. Now, we must make certain we understand what the commands of God are. We don’t need to know why God has called us to do something, but we do need to know what that something is that we are supposed to do.

Years ago, I was talking to a fellow who was discouraged because he wanted to follow the Lord, but thought he was failing. I asked what the problem was, and he said, “Well, in Luke 14:26 Jesus says if we are to be His disciples we must ‘hate our father and mother.’ My Bible study leader says this means I must never visit my parents or even write letters to them. But I love my mom and dad. I go over to their house at least once a week. I’m not a very good Christian.”

I explained to that young man that Jesus simply meant our love for Him must be greater than our love for our parents. Yet the Lord does not ask you to cut ourselves off from them. In fact, He commands us to honor our father and mother. He is probably very pleased that you visit them at least once a week.

I then said, the Bible study leader was wrong to tell you not to visit or write to your parents. When we are reading the Bible and come to a passage that seems very hard to obey, it is a good idea to do more study, check some commentaries, talk to mature Christian friends, and make sure that is actually what the text means.

When we think God has spoken to us through a vision or prophecy and has asked us to do something a bit unusual, we better check what the Bible says to make sure that is indeed what the Lord is telling us to do. We cannot obey God until we know what His command is. Yet, when we do know, we need to obey even if we don't understand why. Two teenagers, very much in love, may not understand why God says they should be married before they have sex. Yet, that is a command He gives, and it ought to be obeyed. A family struggling to pay the bills may not understand why they should be generous in giving to the Lord's work, but that is the command He has given, and it ought to be obeyed.

I know a number of people who have followed that command, even though it was very difficult to do and are very glad they did. When God tells us to do something, we are to do it, even if we don't understand why.

Number 2, The be a Faith Thinker we must not be afraid to think. **Hebrews 11:19 He (Abraham) reasoned that God was able even to raise him (Isaac) from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.** Abraham, the man of great faith reasoned, figured out, what God was going to do. Yes, our last point was that we must believe and obey God even when we don't understand. Yet, faith does not eliminate the need to think. Both faith and reason are important.

A few weeks ago, I mentioned a definition of faith given by Santa Claus in "Miracle of 34th Street," "faith is believing in things when common sense tell us not to." That is a very poor definition. Faith will go beyond reason and common sense, but it certainly does not throw them out. Biblical faith is not gullible faith. If Sarah, or you, or me or anyone else had told Abraham to go and sacrifice Isaac, his response would have been something like, "What? You want me to kill my son? You are crazy! Get out of here before I sacrifice you!"

What causes Abraham to be willing to bind Isaac to that altar is what his experience, reason and common sense tell him about God. The Lord can always be trusted. He never makes mistakes. Abraham was not a robot who mindlessly did what God told him to do. I am sure the whole time he was walking up the mountain, he was thinking. He was thinking about who God was. He was recounting the many ways he had experienced

God's grace in his life over the years. He was remembering how the Lord had always kept His word to him. He realizes that he has to obey, that is only the choice that makes sense.

And then he reaches this remarkable conclusion: God must be going to raise Isaac from the dead. His logic is simple. The first premise is God has promised to give me many descendants through Isaac.

The second premise is, "Now God wants me to kill Isaac." The conclusion of Abraham, the Faith Thinker, is that God must be going to raise Isaac from the dead. That is how he can still be the father of many nations. Now, Abraham's conclusion does not seem technically correct, but the writer notes that in a figurative way, Abraham did receive Isaac back from the dead. My point, though, is that men and women of great faith, like Abraham, are not afraid to think.

We live in a time where reason and logic are sometimes scoffed at. There are individuals who say, "Some people believe God exists and some people believe He does not. I think they may both be right." This type of sloppy thinking and the bizarre teachings of various new age gurus are quite popular in some circles.

Post-modernism, with its religious pluralism, moral relativism, and rejection of absolute truth is the dominant way of thinking in many circles. This "post-truth" perspective has given birth to woke ideologies that challenge Christianity and Biblical teaching on many fronts. Even within the church, some belittle the use of reason.

Yet, we must remember that God has given us minds. He has revealed himself to us through words and sentences in this book. He wants us to read His word, to think about what it means, to think about what it means for our lives and or our world.

I believe God's words to human beings in the 21st century are, "Come let us reason together," let us think about how empty life without the Lord really is. Let us think how the major alternatives to Christianity, naturalism, wokeism and paganism, are really dead ends. Let us think about who Jesus Christ is, what He has accomplished through His death and resurrection, and how life can be full and

significant when we trust in Him as Savior and Lord.

Folks, God's people never need to be afraid to think. God is the author of truth, all truth, and all right-thinking flows from and leads to faith in the living God.

Number 3, to be a Faith Thinker we must be confident in God's promises and power. Abraham reaches his conclusion because he knows God will keep His word. Abraham is not someone who just thinks, "Well everything will work out, it always has." He specifically focuses on God's promise to give him a multitude of descendants through Isaac. He remembers and focuses on those words from Genesis 18, "There is nothing too hard for God."

If the Lord can enable a 90-year-old woman, with a 99-year-old husband, to become pregnant, He can certainly raise a boy from the dead. Abraham's thinking led him toward the truth, and helped him obey the Lord, because he remembered who God was and what He could do.

Friends, we too can find great hope because of God's promises and power. For example, as Christians, we have the promise that we will one day conquer death. A resurrection will occur, and we will receive what Paul calls incorruptible bodies. We will then be ready to enjoy eternity with the Lord in a better country, in a city prepared by God, the new heaven and new earth.

How does this belief compare to the belief of the positive thinkers in Arizona who thought they would never die? There is a big difference. Remember, we are not talking about trying to believe something enough. Our belief is not just wishful thinking. Rather, the object of our faith is a promise made by God Himself. That is important. What and who we believe in matters much more than how much we believe something.

The resurrection is a promise God has made, and confirmed when He raised, not Abraham's son, but His own son, Jesus Christ from the dead. The Faith Thinker looks at that event and says, "Yes, God can be trusted." He has a plan for this world and history is moving toward a culmination when every man, woman, and child will acknowledge Jesus as King and Lord. Because of this, it only makes sense that I devote my time, my energy, and even my money, for the sake of His kingdom. No other

investment will be able to give even a fraction of that return. That is what God calls us to do. Our spirit given confidence in His promises and power will enable us to do it.

Folks, there will likely be numerous times in the days and weeks ahead, when you will be tempted to be worried, anxious, or afraid because of challenges you face. It may be health concerns. It may be tension in your marriage or in another important relationship. It may be because your bills are bigger than your paycheck. It may be because you just cannot shake a feeling of discouragement.

One way to deal with these problems is to just have a positive attitude. Just believe, be confident, that everything will work out the way you want. The weakness of positive thinking, however, is that it cannot change reality.

Years ago, Ted Green was the coach of the Edmonton Oilers Hockey team. When told that his center, Shaun Van Allen, had suffered a concussion and did not know who he was, Green replied, "Good, tell him he is Wayne Gretzky." Yet, just thinking you are a great hockey player, or that you are in perfect health, or that you have a wonderful marriage, or that all your bills are paid, does not make it so.

Instead of being a positive thinker, a far better alternative is to be a Faith Thinker. Yes, we need to believe and obey God, but we should not be afraid to think and ask questions. And most important, we need to focus our thinking upon God and the promises He has made. Those promises include the one in romans 8:28 that for those who trust and follow Jesus, every circumstance, including illness, family strife, financial woes and struggles with depression, will in the end be used for God's glory and for our good.

In the days ahead, through His word and Spirit, may the Lord help us grow as Faith Thinkers.