



Hebrews 11:17-22
Faith is Tested

Summary: God asks us to trust Him for things we cannot see, faith is the fuel for that trust.

You know what's hard about faith? You have to hold on to something you can't see, you have to trust that it will come, it will happen, even though you don't see it yet - you don't have a tracking number or delivery date, and other things may actually be undermining or causing you to question your belief that it's ever going to occur.

And that's not easy. It's not automatic. It's hard. The fact of the matter is: God asks us to trust Him for things we cannot see and faith is the fuel for that trust. We hold on to what we believe about God's calling, His commands, and His character, even when our circumstances and feelings make that really, really, hard to do.

And so, this morning as we continue our walk down the famous Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11 we see examples of men who did just that – they trusted God for things they could not see and now their faith serves as an example to us. We get to see what they did *and* how it turned out and draw strength and courage from their examples; their testimonies fortify our fragile faith. Read with me:

Hebrews 11:17 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, 18 of whom it was said, "In Isaac your seed shall be called," 19 concluding that God was able to raise *him* up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense.

20 By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come.

21 By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, *leaning* on the top of his staff.

22 By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the departure of the children of Israel, and gave instructions concerning his bones.

A few years ago we took the big family trip to Disney World, great times, great memories. You get there first thing in morning and people direct you to park and then you ride the tram to the front gate. While you're waiting for the tram to arrive, a guy with a bullhorn encouraged you to take out your phone and take a picture of the sign indicating where you were – Simba 115, or whatever section you were in, because the parking lot is huge and after a long day in the park it's easy to forget where you started.

Well, I say all of that to say, before we look at these men and the example of their lives, I want you to see where it all starts. Notice, each man's story begins with the same words – **By faith. By faith Abraham. By faith Isaac. By Faith Jacob. By faith Joseph.**

Does that help us understand what's really important here? You see, it's not so much *what* these men did, it's *why* and *how* they did it – they did it all **by faith**. Each of these men, at a pivotal moment in their life, chose to act on something they could not see or make happen on their own. They decided to take a stand for God and see where it would lead.

We can't miss that. That's where we're parked. That's why we're talking about these men today – we remember their lives *because* they chose to walk with God **by faith**.

So, with that in mind, let's get on the tram and head into the park where the first thing we see is this difficult story of Abraham and the call to sacrifice Isaac.

What you have to know is, God had called Abraham out of modern-day Iraq to come to modern-day Israel and promised to make a great nation out of him, to use him as a source of blessing to all the nations. It was a big, big, promise for a man who was already past middle age and had no children of his own at the time.

But Abraham and his wife Sarah trusted God, they believed He could do for them what they could not do for themselves.

They had some missteps along the way, they made mistakes, but the overall trend of their life was bent in a Godward direction. And one day, the promise was fulfilled - Abraham and Sarah were blessed with a child through a miraculous pregnancy.

And when I say miraculous, I mean it. Each time the Bible gives you the history of what happened, the Scriptures are very clear – this was an unlikely event. This should not have happened. If you remember when we read about it last week, it says in Hebrews 11:12, that Abraham was **as good as dead** when Sarah became pregnant. It was long past the time when things like this are supposed to happen, but it did happen.

And then, years later, when the miraculous boy had become a young man, God showed up again and asked Abraham to sacrifice him. The story is well known to Jews and Christians, but also Muslims, it's even in the Koran.

But what's it all about? What's going on? Why would God be involved with such a thing? Because, let's be real – the command to sacrifice Isaac is radical – it's horrible, it's the most drastic form of sacrifice we can imagine.

We think of this as the primitive worship of uneducated pagans or godless barbarians. And we're right, human sacrifice was already known in Abraham's day, it was even practiced in Ur, the city he came from, archeologists have uncovered evidence of human sacrifices at the ziggurats in Iraq and in the land of Canaan where Abraham eventually settled.

But we're dangerously naïve if we think human sacrifice is only performed by half-dressed savages dancing in the woods or ignorant nomads living in the desert. It happens every day in America in sterile environments known as 'clinics' in the form of abortion, and now you can even order a pill delivered by mail and perform the ritual at the time and location of

your choosing. Yes, we still sacrifice children in modern America with our iPhones and 5G and electric cars and smart appliances, only the gods we sacrifice children to aren't carved out of wood or stone or made out of metal, they go by the name of choice and convenience, cost and timing, career and education.

I've told the story before, but when I was a Sergeant in the Marine Corps, we were visited by a group of Midshipmen who were out on their summer tour spending time with the Navy and Marine Corps instead of in the schoolroom. Midshipmen are students at the Naval Academy, and the Naval Academy, like West Point and the Air Force Academy has a policy that students cannot have dependents – no spouses or children.

Well, during that summer, while they were visiting us, one of the Midshipmen went down to San Diego and had an abortion. She had become pregnant and then determined to sacrifice the human being inside of her so that she could continue on with her education and get a degree from this particular school, one of the best in the nation.

The same choice is made on many other campuses today, I'm not trying to single out one situation or one school. Here's my whole point – don't think we're so far advanced and so much more sophisticated than those "terrible, ignorant, ancient or primitive civilizations." We still make human sacrifices today.

But we shouldn't, not as pagans or as Christians.

You need to know: the command to Abraham was unique – it had never been given before and will never be given again. In fact, just a few centuries later, God delivered the Ten Commandments to Moses, expressly forbidding murder, and then as He gave the rest of the law, He specifically forbade child and human sacrifice in case anyone thought there was a loophole.¹

So, why did God tell Abraham to do something He had never told anyone to do before and would tell us never to do again?

The answer is, it was a test – you can read that here in vs 17: it happened when Abraham [was tested](#). And we read the same thing back in Genesis 22 where you read the original history of the events:

Genesis 22:1 Now it came to pass after these things that [God tested Abraham](#), and said to him, "Abraham!"
And he said, "Here I am."

¹ Leviticus 18:21, 20:1-5 specifically forbid the practice of "passing" someone "through the arms of Molech." Statues of Molech, a Canaanite god, were made of metal and superheated by fire before living infants were placed on the outstretched hands of the statue and the child was burned alive. Later the prophets would also speak against the worship of Molech and any other form of human sacrifice in Jeremiah 19:5; Ezekiel 20:30-32, 23:36-39.

[2](#) Then He said, "Take now 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."

OK, so we can see it twice, this was a [test](#). And, here's something interesting for you to know: a test is not a temptation, but they're closely related. In fact, in both Hebrew, the original language of the Old Testament, and Greek, the original language of the New Testament, temptation and test are different translations *for the same word*. The Hebrew *nacah* and the Greek *peirazo* can be translated as either "to test" or "to tempt."

So, what's the difference? The answer is: the difference between a test and a temptation is the motive of the administrator. Do they intend to see you grow in the face of a test or collapse in the face of temptation?

We all know resisting temptation can bring out the best in you, but so can a well-designed test. I'll show you what I mean.

Dr Carl Deimer was my Church History professor in seminary – he was an older man but still very solid physically, you could imagine him playing on the defensive line in football in his youth; but it wasn't his physique that intimidated students, it was his tests.

Dr Deimer was known to give the hardest tests in the school. But he was also the most fair – he would give you a study guide up front that told you *exactly* what you needed to be prepared to answer – and he made sure he covered everything on the test in class. So, when the exam came around, there were no surprises – you knew exactly what could be on the test, and you knew you had been exposed to the answers, the question was: how well had you prepared yourself to give an answer?

Now Dr Deimer didn't relish causing anxiety in his students, he wasn't having fun by making graduate students sweat, quite the contrary – he loved us, but he knew us. He knew that students are lazy and that we were unlikely to set the bar high for ourselves, so he went ahead and set it for us at a height *he knew we could reach*, but only if we worked at it. Dr Deimer knew a test can actually bring out the best in us when administered by someone who wants to see us succeed.

So, you see how God tests us to strengthen us, while Satan tempts us to destroy us and the same situation can be used for either purpose, depending on the motive of the administrator. Well, here we see here that Abraham was put to the [test](#).

But we don't really have a problem with that do we? That's not our real concern. What we're fixated on is the object of the test. Abraham is told "[sacrifice your son, your only son, whom you love.](#)"

And I want to argue, it's that last little bit that contains the key to understanding what's going on. The fact that it says Abraham [loved Isaac](#) is important, very, very important. I'll tell you why: the Hebrew word for love appears 195 times in the Bible, *but this is the first*.

Think about that, you're 22 chapters into the Scripture and the first time the word [love](#) appears is to describe the affection of a man for his son. Now that should say something to the men in this room. That even if you haven't felt the love of your biological father, one of your greatest goals in life should be to ensure that your kids or someone you can formally or even casually adopt, does.

Every dad should love his kids – after all, that is one of the primary ways God reveals Himself to us – He is the Father and we are His children.

But there's something extra special Isaac – you know all that Abraham went through in order to have him. Well, now Isaac is probably a teenager, though he may be as old as 37 – in just two chapters he gets married and then makes Abraham, who waited so long to be a dad, a grandpa.

According to the culture of the Ancient Near East, the first-born son inherited nearly everything the father owned or was entitled to – not much different than the passing of a king's estate to the prince.

Abraham was going to be the base of the trunk of the family tree that God would one day use to bring Jesus into the world. When he looked at Isaac, he was looking at the one who be the next to receive all God had promised to do in Abraham and everything that would one day become the nation of Israel, and even more distant, the Christian faith.

Abraham has waited his entire life for this boy and when he looks at him he sees not only the promise of everything in the future, but also everything in the past – this boy is the object of decades of hope and tears and prayers begging God for a son.

This boy will inherit every promise God has made, but also, on a simpler level, he will inherit everything his dad has worked so hard to gather and sustain – a hundred years' worth of sweat and effort will be passed on to this young man when dad dies. So, when Abraham looks at him, he is in a sense, looking at the whole sum of his own life. And God says, *give that to Me* – worship through sacrifice. It was [a test](#), a test that makes everything Dr Diemer did look like an open book quiz.

But friends, if you know much of God, you know He's still issuing the same kind of test. Oh, not a call to sacrifice your child, but a call to do what that represented, to choose worship through sacrifice. God is still asking: do you hold everything in your life with an open hand before Me?

Christian, you either already know what I'm talking about or you're going to learn soon – God still issues tests and I can tell you exactly what kind of question will be on it. He'll ask: do you want this more than you want Me?

Do you want this relationship more than Me?
Do you want these friends more than Me?

Do you want your freedom to do this thing more than Me?

And when God asks, do you love Me more than these, or this, it's not an easy question to answer. Even if you know the answer in theory, wait until you get to the practical application part of the test. Wait until you come to the moment when you have to make a real decision to say yes or no to someone or something and do it because God is asking you to prove that you put Him first.

I remember this really came home to me doing missionary work in East Africa. I served with a group that trained chaplains for a revolutionary war in South Sudan, back when they were fighting for their independence from the north. The compound where we trained these men had been bombed in the past, men had lost their lives on this very ground. And to the south, in Northern Uganda, there was a terrorist group that operated in the region. So, you had an enemy government threatening you from the north and a terrorist group threatening you from the south. It was a great place to test your faith.

To train the chaplains we brought in pastors from the United States and each time we would have to make an assessment based on local conditions and the cost of various forms of travel – should we move by road in an armored Land Cruiser and run the risk of attack, travel by boat up river which was cheaper, and also run the risk of attack, or pay for a private flight into the area where the compound was?

I'm telling you, it's one thing to think hypothetically about being willing to die for your faith. But when you face the very real possibility of not coming home from a trip to go teach the Bible, it gets real. When the air raid siren goes off in the middle of the night and you have to go running for the bomb shelter with everyone else, it gets real. Your faith is tested and you get to explore the question: what do I really believe about God and serving Him and what is really valuable in life?

Christian, I don't know when your test is scheduled for, but if it hasn't happened yet, or it's not happening now, it's coming. And if you've taken it once, don't assume you'll never take it again. God tests His people. He asks us to do hard things. To take on, or give up, hard things. It's not wrong to love people, it's not wrong to like things, but the question on the test is: do you love him, her, it or them, more than you love Me?

So here's the rest of the story. You need to remember; Abraham faced the test and He passed. We've even got a copy of his answer, He concluded

Hebrews 11:19 ... that God *was* able to raise *him* up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense.

Abraham didn't know exactly what God was up to, or how it would work out, but he knew it would. Someway, somehow. So, when he had moved from the theoretical to the practical, when he had decided he would go through with it, God spoke clearly and said 'Wait, I've provided another sacrifice instead' – a truth with double meaning.

On that day, God stopped the sacrifice of Isaac by providing a ram that had been caught by its horns in some nearby brush, but one day, a few thousand years later, on this same mountain, God would provide Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God as a sacrifice.

We see [2 Chronicles 3:1](#) that Mount Moriah where Abraham and Isaac stood, was part of what became the city of Jerusalem, and specifically, it was where Solomon built the Temple.

So, thousands of years after Isaac followed his dad up this hill carrying wood for an offering, Jesus followed His Father up the same hill to make an offering of Himself on the wood of the cross. Jesus spilled His blood on the exact same mountain, so that Abraham didn't have to sacrifice his son and I don't have to sacrifice mine.

Abraham's faith was tested, but his son lived and followed in his father's footsteps of faith, a faith that was transmitted through the family for generations:

[20 By faith Isaac \[Abraham's son\] blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come.](#)
[21 By faith Jacob \[Isaac's son\], when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, *leaning on the top of his staff.*](#)
[22 By faith Joseph \[Jacob's son\], when he was dying, made mention of the departure of the children of Israel, and gave instructions concerning his bones.](#)

Do you see how faith flowed through this family, each generation following in the footsteps in the previous?

Notice, all three examples have one thing in common – they each involved men at the point of death who took action on earth in light of what they believed about God. They believed there would be a future and that God would watch over, guide, and bless their children through it.

They believed God's goodness would continue to reach out even after they were gone, and they spoke of it – they told their children and grandchildren to expect it, to look for God, listen for God, and to follow God, [by faith](#). They made preparations for a future based on God's calling, commands, and character and gave their children and grandchildren blessings and instruction, [by faith](#).

Their actions on earth were evidence of what they believed about eternity. Their history is recorded as an example for us because God is still seeking people who will live [by faith](#). People who will trust that His ways are best, that His calling and His commands are good. That His character can be trusted, even when we can't see how it's all going to work out.

We've covered a lot of ground this morning and talked about some heavy stuff, so let me share just one more thing before we go, and that is: you need to know that God doesn't test you until you're ready. Just like Dr Diemer, He may give difficult tests, but not until you've learned what you need to know.

The whole incident with Isaac was not Abraham's first test. This wasn't a pop quiz on the first day of class. God had been teaching and training Abraham for many years. And there were some tests that he failed. He took his extended family with him when he first left his homeland and they held him up from following God. He lied about his wife to save his own skin and said she was his sister. There was the time they tried to use Hagar as a surrogate. Abraham flunked a few exams.

But God was patient with him. And he's patient with you too. He knows what you can handle and what you're not ready for. He's going to test you, in little ways and really, really, big ones too. But know this, for each test: He won't put it in front of you until you're ready to pass. He knows what you can handle...the problem is, He knows you better than you know yourself.

Don't expect it to be easy. It may be excruciatingly hard. Shockingly, stunningly, hard. But God will walk you through it, He will prepare you for it and He has an amazing graduation party prepared at His house one day for all of those that overcome, [by faith](#) and trust Him for things we cannot see.

Let's pray.

Ultimately, the question underneath all our questions about faith is: can I really trust God?

The
CITYGATES
C H U R C H
Sermon Application and Discussion Questions

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Summary: God asks us to trust Him for things we cannot see, faith is the fuel for that trust.

- Have you ever had a demanding coach, parent, or teacher? Someone who pushed you harder than you would push yourself? What did you learn from that?
- Have you experienced a situation that could be taken as either a test or a temptation?
- Has God ever given you something good, like giving Isaac to Abraham, and then asked if you would be willing to give it back?
 - Side note: think about Frodo offering the One Ring to Gandalf who sees the good he could do with it, but knows it would devour him, so he resists the offer saying, “Do not tempt me! I dare not take it, not even to keep it safe, unused. The wish to wield it would be too great, for my strength.”
 - Are there things that would be, or are, too great for your strength, things that you could not surrender to God if He asked?
- When and how has God tested your faith? What did you learn, and what can you share as a result?
- If you knew you were dying, who would you bless and what form would that blessing take? What do you want to see passed on from your life to the next generation?
- Read Genesis 48:9-22 to see Jacob’s blessings of his children. Jacob (Israel) died with his family living in Egypt, how would this have affected your views of the future and the promises you received about the Promised Land?
- Read Genesis 50:22-26 for Joseph’s instructions regarding his bones. Read Exodus 13:19 and Joshua 24:32 to see what happened.
- Explore the ways God tested the faith of those who followed Him in these examples:
 - At the battle of Jericho – Joshua 6:3
 - With instructions to Gideon about the size of his army – Judges 7:7
 - By sending a prophet to depend on a dying widow – 1 Kings 17
 - By telling His disciples to feed the multitude – John 6:6