

“God Is Able”

The Eighteenth in a Series on the Epistle to the Hebrews

Texts: Hebrews 11:17-22; Genesis 22:1-19

We've all heard people complain that the Bible is boring. But when we take a look at the events of redemptive history, we find what has to be the most interesting and compelling story in all of human history. In Genesis 12, God calls a man named Abraham and his wife Sarah to leave their home and move to a new country as yet unseen. Abraham goes. God then tells Abraham that he will become the father of a great nation, and will have so many descendants that only God can count them all. What makes this promise so remarkable is the fact that Abraham and his wife were by now nearly one hundred years old, and it seemed virtually impossible that they would be able to conceive a child. Yet, despite their physical limitations, Abraham and Sarah believed that God would make good on his promise. And then when Sarah gives birth to a son (Isaac) through whom the promise would be fulfilled, and after the boy grew to manhood, God appears to Abraham yet again, and this time commands Abraham to take this only son and kill him . . . How could God command such a thing? How could God's promise be fulfilled if the heir is killed? And what would Abraham do in light of such a command? This is not only a compelling story and a startling turn of events, it raises a number of questions about the mysterious redemptive purposes of God, one of several questions about the patriarchs addressed in the 11th chapter of Hebrews.

We are working our way through Hebrews 11, the so-called “hall of faith” – that list of Old Testament luminaries who are considered to be examples of people who had great faith under the most trying of times. As we have seen in previous weeks while covering this chapter, the author of Hebrews' focus in chapter 11 falls not so much upon the examples these people set for us (although this is certainly a part of what is in view), but on the fact that these people all placed their trust in the same thing—the unshakable and gracious promise of God to provide his people with a Messiah who will redeem them from their sin.

Because this chapter is quite long and refers to so many remarkable and important events in the Old Testament, I have decided to approach Hebrews 11 by dividing it into sections corresponding to the particular period in redemptive history in which the individuals who are mentioned lived. We have already covered the first three sections. In the first section (vv. 1-3, in which the author defines faith) we took note of the fact that in verse 1, the author defines of faith as “*the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*” Faith (the noun, and the verb “to believe”) is a technical term in the New Testament, in which someone's trust is directed toward a particular object—usually the person and work of Jesus Christ. This means that faith—as it is biblically understood—cannot exist apart from the gospel.

We also saw that in some cases (as here in Hebrews 11), “faith” can mean taking God at his word when God makes promises to his people. Each of the people mentioned here make the catalogue of those who believed God's promise, because they did exactly that—they trusted in God's covenant promise to send a redeemer who would save his people from their sins. Therefore, instead of seeing this chapter as a list of Old Testament heroes we are to emulate, it is better to see this chapter as a catalogue of those who believed God's covenant promise throughout the various twists and turns of redemptive history.

In the second section of this chapter (vv. 4-7), the author addresses three of the so-called “pre-diluvians” (people who lived before the flood). These include Abel, Enoch, and Noah. All three of these men believed God's promise, which at this early point in redemptive history amounted to God's promise made

to Adam immediately after the fall of the human race into sin as recounted in Genesis 3:15. *“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”* These men are all said to have believed God’s promise that he would provide a redeemer, and because of that faith, they lived exemplary lives which demonstrated for all to see their faith in God’s promise as, for example, when Abel made the proper sacrifice, Enoch walked with God, and Noah began building the ark.

In the third section of Hebrews 11 (vv. 8-16), the author discusses Abraham, the so-called “man of faith.” If you were going to compose a list of those Old Testament saints who believed God’s promise, Abraham would be among the first people to come to mind. In fact, in Genesis 15:6, it is expressly stated of Abraham, *“and he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.”* God called Abraham to leave his home in Ur and then move lock, stock, and barrel to the land of Canaan, to that place where Abraham would dwell as a sojourner in that land which God promised to give to Abraham’s descendants. What makes the promise utterly remarkable is by the time it comes to pass, Abraham was an old man, and his wife Sarah was nearly ninety. Yet God promised that they would have a child through whom the promise would be realized. Despite their advanced age, both Abraham and Sarah embraced this promise, and as a result were justified before God.

We are also told that Abraham knew that included within the promise of the land and descendants who would inherit the land of Canaan, was something much better—a heavenly city whose builder and architect was none other than YHWH himself. Through the eyes of faith, Abraham saw that the promise of the land was also an indication of a heavenly inheritance—the promise of eternal life. There can be no eternal life apart from the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of righteousness.

So, having set the stage for the next section in Hebrews 11—a discussion of Abraham and his immediate descendants (Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph)—we now move on to discuss verses 17-22, that section of Hebrews 11 dealing with the nature of God’s promise during the era of the so-called patriarchs (men who are the fathers of Israel).

In verses 17-18, the author of Hebrews now focuses upon the events of the life of Abraham after the birth of Isaac. In verse 17, we learn the precise nature of the remarkable events recounted in Genesis 22:1-19 (our Old Testament lesson). *“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 author of Hebrews speaks of the account of Abraham and Isaac as a “test.” The nature of the test is that Abraham was commanded to sacrifice his only son Isaac, the same son whom God had miraculously provided and through whom the promised seed would come.

Of course, anyone who knows the gospel account should immediately make the connection between what transpires in Genesis 22 when God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son (Isaac), and what God himself does to save us from our sins—sacrifice his only son, Jesus Christ. It is interesting to note that although Abraham had more than one son—Ishamel was also his son with the slave woman, Hagar—the author of Hebrews has no trouble speaking of Isaac as Abraham’s only son. The reason is that Isaac is that one through whom the promise God made to Abraham will be realized.

It is necessary to carefully consider the account in Genesis 22 to understand the significance of this test and why Abraham plays such a prominent role in the catalogue of those who believe the covenant promise in Hebrews 11. Beginning in Genesis 22:1, we read, *“after these things,”* a reference to God’s interaction with Abraham up until this point in redemptive history, *“God tested Abraham and said to*

him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah,' (Moriah is that place where Solomon would later build the temple in Jerusalem, and a good fifty miles from Beersheba) "and offer [Isaac] there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." Although we are alerted to the fact that what follows is a test of Abraham's faith in God's covenant promise, it is hard to miss the stark and shocking nature of God's command. "Abraham, you are to kill the very one through whom the promise will be fulfilled."

While at first glance this raises questions about God commanding Abraham to take a life, something forbidden by the moral law, the issue will ultimately resolve itself in a totally unexpected way. Abraham must have been stunned by the nature of God's command. Yet the biblical account only speaks of Abraham's faith in the promise as the basis for his obedience in doing what God commanded—no matter what that may be. As we read in verses 3 and following, "so Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him." Based upon his later question, Isaac did not know what was about to come, even as his father prepared to make the burnt offering of his beloved son.

"On the third day"—a time frame which is likely anything but coincidental—"Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. 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.'" Again, Abraham does not balk, but worships YHWH, before going off to do the heart-wrenching thing God commanded of him. Abraham even informs the two men that he **and** Isaac will return to them, together, which is a remarkable testimony to the fact that Abraham believed that YHWH would somehow provide a way out so as to fulfill the promise. According to verses 6 and following, "and Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together." The very thought of Isaac carrying the wood up the hill upon which he would be sacrificed and consumed by fire is one of the most poignant moments in all the Bible.

Familiar with the way sacrifices to YHWH were conducted, the properly catechized Isaac soon figured out that something was out of the ordinary. "And Isaac said to his father Abraham, 'My father!' And he said, 'Here I am, my son.' He said, 'Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?'" Wow. If you are Abraham, how do you answer that question? We do not wait long for an answer. "Abraham said, 'God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.' So they went both of them together." Not only does Abraham already understand the principle of a substitutionary atonement (that an animal dies in the place of the sinner in anticipation of the death of Jesus Christ), he does hesitate for a moment to proceed. He tells his son that God will provide a lamb, which is nothing but an Old Testament way of saying that God will provide a Savior who will deliver us from our sins and misery.

As we learn in verses 9-10, "when they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son." Abraham believed the promise that his descendants would inherit the land of Canaan. That promise God had made to him could only be fulfilled in the one over whom he has raised the knife! Nevertheless, Abraham obeys the Lord's command. And just when the deed is about to be done, Abraham is suddenly interrupted. "But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.'" God has intervened! Isaac will be

saved. God will provide a lamb after all.

According to verses 13-14, “*and Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place, ‘The Lord will provide’; as it is said to this day, ‘On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.’*” Not only did God provide the ram on the very spot where the Jerusalem temple would be built centuries later, we have one of the clearest pictures in redemptive history foreshadowing the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, the lamb of God, who would die in the place of sinners. Abraham believed God’s promise and God has provided, just as Abraham knew that he would.

The account ends with a renewal of God’s covenant promise in which Abraham had placed his trust. According to verses 15 and following, “*and the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven and said, ‘By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.’*” God’s covenant oath stands because God keeps his promises. Although Abraham was put to the test, we not only see the depth of his faith, we also find the gospel in type and shadow, as well as yet another instance in which God graciously provides everything which he has commanded of us.

As we jump back to Hebrews 11:19, we find a remarkable (and bit different) understanding of this great Old Testament event, as reinterpreted by the author of Hebrews in the light of Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection. He says that Abraham “*considered that God was able even to raise [Isaac] from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.*” As we have seen, Abraham told the two men whom he brought with him, that he and Isaac would both return from the mountain, even though he was absolutely ready to obey God’s command to put Isaac to death. Now, we are given the reason for Abraham’s confidence. The man of faith knew that because the promise was to be fulfilled through Isaac, if God commanded that Isaac’s life be taken, God also had the power to raise Isaac from the dead.

Many of the church fathers saw in this story a parallel between Abraham offering his only son unto death, only to be figuratively raised from the dead when the angel intervened, and that of God offering his only son Jesus Christ for our sins and then raising him from the dead. John Calvin is aware of this view, but says instead, “in my judgment the real meaning here is that Abraham received his son as the one who had been restored to him from death to new life.”¹ This, I think is Abraham’s point. Believing that God would make good on his covenant promise, Abraham knew that if he sacrificed Isaac, God would bring him back to life. This fact helps us understand what the author of Hebrews means when he said of Abraham in the previous section that he “*was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.*” Not only was Abraham looking forward to eternal life, this was very likely tied to a knowledge that there would be a resurrection from the dead at the end of the age.

Having completed his account of Abraham’s faith in God’s covenant promise, the author of Hebrews now briefly gives us an abbreviated account of Isaac in verse 20. “*By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau.*” This is a reference to Genesis 27 and the account of Isaac blessing Jacob (his younger son), not Esau, his older son. In verses 28-29, we read that as he was nearing death, thinking

¹ Calvin, Hebrews and I and II Peter, 173-174.

Esau was before him, Isaac blessed Jacob saying, *“may God give you of the dew of heaven and of the fatness of the earth and plenty of grain and wine. Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you!”* Based upon the content of this blessing, Isaac clearly knew the covenant promise which God had given to his own father Abraham, and in faith, Isaac knew that through his own son, God would keep his promise. Because God chose Jacob over Esau, God ensured that this is what would happen. Abraham will have countless descendants. A great nation will be formed. God’s people will inherit the land and bask in great prosperity as promised by God.

In verse 21, the author of Hebrews moves on to address the next person in the line of the patriarchs—turning briefly to the account of Jacob in the closing chapters of Genesis. *“By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff.”* The author of Hebrews is referring to the scene recorded in Genesis 48, where we read beginning in verse 1, *“After this, Joseph was told, ‘Behold, your father [Jacob] is ill.’ So he took with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. And it was told to Jacob, ‘Your son Joseph has come to you.’ Then Israel [Jacob] summoned his strength and sat up in bed. And Jacob said to Joseph, ‘God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me, and said to me, ‘Behold, I will make you fruitful and multiply you, and I will make of you a company of peoples and will give this land to your offspring after you for an everlasting possession.’ And now your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, are mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine, as Reuben and Simeon are. And the children that you fathered after them shall be yours. They shall be called by the name of their brothers in their inheritance.”*

The account continues in Genesis 48:8, where the covenant promises continue. *“When Israel saw Joseph’s sons, he said, ‘Who are these?’ Joseph said to his father, ‘They are my sons, whom God has given me here.’ And he said, ‘Bring them to me, please, that I may bless them.’ Now the eyes of Israel were dim with age, so that he could not see. So Joseph brought them near him, and he kissed them and embraced them. And Israel said to Joseph, ‘I never expected to see your face; and behold, God has let me see your offspring also.’ Then Joseph removed them from his knees, and he bowed himself with his face to the earth. And Joseph took them both, Ephraim in his right hand toward Israel's left hand, and Manasseh in his left hand toward Israel's right hand, and brought them near him. And Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on the head of Ephraim, who was the younger, and his left hand on the head of Manasseh, crossing his hands (for Manasseh was the firstborn).”*

The grandson of Abraham attempts to bless his own grandsons with the same covenant promises Abraham believed. But once again, God will intervene. *“And he blessed Joseph and said, ‘The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the boys; and in them let my name be carried on, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth.’ When Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand on the head of Ephraim, it displeased him, and he took his father's hand to move it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head. And Joseph said to his father, ‘Not this way, my father; since this one is the firstborn, put your right hand on his head.’ But his father refused and said, ‘I know, my son, I know. He also shall become a people, and he also shall be great. Nevertheless, his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall become a multitude of nations.”* The same covenant promise Abraham embraced will be fulfilled through Joseph’s younger son, Ephraim. God’s purposes will come to pass.

“So [Jacob] blessed them that day, saying, ‘By you Israel will pronounce blessings, saying, ‘God make

you as Ephraim and as Manasseh.’ Thus he put Ephraim before Manasseh. Then Israel said to Joseph, “Behold, I am about to die, but God will be with you and will bring you again to the land of your fathers. Moreover, I have given to you rather than to your brothers one mountain slope that I took from the hand of the Amorites with my sword and with my bow.” It is important that we see the continuity between Genesis 22 and what is spoken in Genesis 27, as well as here in Genesis 48. When we read the accounts, what is emphasized is not Isaac’s faith, Jacob’s faith, nor Joseph’s faith, but that God’s covenant promise stands across the generations. God has promised, and he is able to keep his promises.

Finally, in verse 22, the author of Hebrews completes his treatment of the patriarchs by taking up the final event in the book of Genesis. *“By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.”* This is a comment on Genesis 50:22-26. *“So Joseph remained in Egypt, he and his father’s house. Joseph lived 110 years. And Joseph saw Ephraim’s children of the third generation. The children also of Machir the son of Manasseh were counted as Joseph’s own. And Joseph said to his brothers, ‘I am about to die, but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.’ Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, ‘God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here.’ So Joseph died, being 110 years old. They embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt.”* This promise is fulfilled by Moses as recounted in Exodus 13:19 when Moses took Joseph’s bones with the Israelites when they left Egypt during the Exodus, and buried them in Canaan, the land of promise.

The one constant throughout these remarkable accounts is that each of the patriarchs embraced the same covenant promise by faith, and ensured that their descendants knew and understood what God had promised. They all believed that God is able and this is why we read of them in Hebrews 11.

What, then, do we take with us, by way of application?

WThere are two amazing things which jump out from this section of Hebrews. The first is the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, when God had miraculously provided Abraham with a son through whom the promise may be fulfilled. While there is certainly a parallel to God sending his own son to the cross, the author of Hebrews informs us that some how and in some way, fifteen hundred years before the coming of Jesus Christ, Abraham believed that if he was to take Isaac’s life, God was able to raise Isaac from the dead. This tells us that even at this early point in redemptive history, God’s people anticipated that the curse (sin and death) would be overturned. We look back upon these events, and we witness God’s faithfulness in keeping his promise finally and fully on Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Abraham believed that God is able. We look back at the cross and empty tomb and know that God is able.

The other thing which jumps from this passage is that God is able to fulfill his promise, even when the patriarchs tried to help him do so. Isaac blessed Jacob (the one whom God had chosen), even though Esau was the older son whom Isaac thought he was blessing. Joseph wants Jacob to bless his son Manasseh, but Jacob instead blesses Ephraim (the younger son) because this is the one through whom the promised seed will come. The patriarchs had an amazing sense of how God’s covenant promise will be fulfilled, and when they did not, God is able to ensure that his promises come to pass. God is not only gracious, he’s also sovereign. He ensures that his covenant promises will come to pass for us (including the promise that he will turn all things for our good), because he has the power to do so. And how do we know this is true for us? We have the catalogue in Hebrews 11 of all those who believed God’s covenant promise, we have their testimony to God’s faithfulness, and in addition, we have a cross and empty tomb, proving that their faith in God’s promise, as well as ours, is never in vain. God is able.