



Living a Life of Faith

An ABF Series on Hebrews 11

Lesson 6 The Patriarchs: A Life that Clings to God's Promises

Teacher's Edition

Where we've been (v. 1-16)

The author of Hebrews has been pleading with Jewish Christians not to go back to Judaism. He has argued that they must be strong in faith, believing who God is, what God says, and what God does even and especially when life doesn't make sense. He has shown them that faith makes the unseen and hoped for things real for us in the present, so that we can grab onto and claim the promises of God. We've seen so far that faith is necessary to live a life that...

- Pleases God (Abel and Enoch vv. 4-6)
- Stands against the corrupt culture (Noah v. 7).
- Doesn't live by sight (Abraham vv. 8-12).
- Lives for eternity (The Patriarchs vv. 13-16).

But you promised!

A promise is a big deal when you're a kid. When mom and dad promise, they are locked in. They have to do it. And if they ever

try to wriggle their way out of something they had said they would do, whether they used the word “promise” or not, they are quickly reminded of the dishonest ethic involved in such a move. “But you promised!” A child intuitively clings to the promise of their fallen, broken parents.

How much more should the believer cling to the very promises of the God of truth? In the last lesson, we saw that a desire for heaven is part of what kept Abraham and his descendants going while they were wandering about in Canaan. They didn’t want to go back because they wanted a better country. Today we are going to see that each of these men were also able to endure because they clung on to the promises of God and never stopped believing them throughout their entire lives.

Abraham Clings to God’s Promises (vv. 17-19)

Abraham had already shown faith by leaving his homeland and living in tents all his life, then believing that God would allow his wife to conceive once it was too late for her. But now comes what is considered by many to be the crux of the whole life of Abraham, his sacrifice of Isaac (Gen 22, cf. James 2:21-23).

The Testing of Faith

We find here a troubling phrase “when he was tested.” A reading of the original account makes it clear who is the One testing: God (Gen 22:1). The difficulty is that this same Greek word (*peirazo*) is used in James 1:13-14 when it says that God cannot tempt us! So which is it? Does God tempt us, or doesn’t he?

Ask if anyone in your group has any ideas about how to reconcile James 1:13-14 and Genesis 22:1 before moving on.

To answer this issue, we need to take a closer look at the word “try/tempt/test.” *Peirazo* has two basic meanings:

1. To test in order to discover (2 Cor 13:5).
2. To tempt in order to harm (Mark 1:13).¹

God sometimes chooses to test us to see what we’re made of (Hebrews 11:17), but he never tempts us to do evil for the purpose of harming us (James 1:13-14).

If God is all-knowing, why would he test us to see what we’re made of?

Obviously, God knows what is in our heart, but He tests us for several reasons. He wants to reveal to us areas where we need to grow. Sometimes we fail the test, and that shows us areas where our faith is weak. Abraham lied about his wife Sarah to stay out of trouble. Twice. In both instances, it caused him even more trouble.

Sometimes God tests us, knowing that we will pass the test, in order to reveal His character to a watching world. God will sometimes bring himself glory by putting us through difficult trials so that those around us will marvel at the difference that God makes in our lives.

Often his purpose is both! Like with Job, God both brings himself glory through our response and at the same time puts us

¹ One Greek dictionary (BDAG) gives 4 definitions for this word. Definitions 2 and 4 are important for us “2. To endeavor to discover the nature or character of something by testing, *try, make trial of, put to the test*” and “4. to entice to improper behavior, *tempt*”

through a refining fire that teaches us important lessons about our need for greater faith.

What comfort can we gather knowing that every trial that comes our way is sent to us by God?

The Difficulty of Faith

God asked Abraham to give up the thing he cherished the most: his son. The passage draws our attention to the difficulty of this sacrifice in three ways.

- 1. The passage reminds us that Abraham had received the promises.** As we saw in our previous lesson, Abraham received the promise of a son through Sarah. So far, the only promises Abraham had received was Isaac, and now God wanted Abraham to sacrifice the very promises that Abraham had been given. If ever there was a time when someone had the right to claim something as belonging
- 2. The passage reminds us that Isaac was Abraham's only son, pointing out the special relationship.** Hopeful the phrase "only son" confused you for a second, because Isaac was not in fact Abraham's only son. There was Ishmael, and after Sarah died there were several other sons. This word is used to point to the unique nature of the relationship. This same word is used of Christ in John 3:16. How fitting that God asked Abraham to sacrifice his only son, knowing that nearly 2,000 years later, He "would provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering" (Genesis 22:8) by sending His only Son.

3. The passage reminds us that Isaac was the one through whom the rest of the promises were coming.

Isaac was not just one promise of God, Isaac was the one who would be the father of the nation God had promised, who would eventually be the ancestor of Christ, and whose descendants would inherit the land. All of the promises of God hung on Isaac, and God was asking Abraham to kill Isaac!

What are some things we face today that make it harder to believe the promises of God?

The Logic of Faith

The author gives us an inspired look into the mind of Abraham. What we find there is absolutely stunning. Apparently, Abraham expected to kill his son and that God would raise him up afterward. Although we read about several resurrections in Scripture, all of them happen before Abraham. Abraham looked at the situation and believed that God would fulfill His promises, even though the only way he could make sense of the situation is by believing that God would do something God had never done and had never even promised to do!

We learn an important lesson here about faith. Faith starts with the promises and character of God, and seeks to make sense of our situation in light of those promises, rather than trying to make sense of God in light of our circumstances. It starts with truth, not with my perception of a situation. When difficulties come your way, are you ready like Abraham to trust God no matter what? Or do you have to know what God is doing to trust him?

The Patriarchs Cling to God's Promises (vv 20-22)

The descriptions of Abraham's descendants might strike us as odd inclusions. How are the activities that they are praised for – blessing sons, worshipping on staffs, and giving instructions for burial – in what way are these actions of faith? The answer is that in every case, these men made it to the end of their lives still believing that God would fulfill his promises. Faith clings on to God's promises – and it never lets go.

Isaac Clings to God's Promises (v. 20)

Why does it matter that Isaac blessed his sons concerning things to come? Well, to answer that question, we need to ask a few more. First, when did Isaac do this? At the end of his life. After watching Abraham die without ever owning the land that was promised him. While still not seeing his descendants owning the land.

Second, what was the blessing? His blessing was more than, "Have a good life!" A careful reading of the story shows it as a transfer of the blessing of God. Isaac was essentially saying "God is going to bless you and fulfill His promises through you," especially for Jacob's (stolen) blessing (cf. Genesis 27:28-29). Isaac was still trusting that God would be true to his promises when his health started failing him and his time to die drew near.

Jacob Clings to God's Promises (v. 21)

Jacob struggled at the beginning of his life, but by the end of his life he was a man of faith. As he was dying, he prophetically blessed the sons of Joseph (Genesis 48:20-21), again showing that he was a man who believed that God would fulfill his

promises. “Leaning upon the top of his staff” points to the fact that his strength was gone. Yet as his body was giving out, Jacob continued worshipping his God. He lived a life of faith right up until the end.

Joseph Clings to God’s Promises (v. 22)

Joseph too believed that God would fulfill his promises (cf Genesis 50:24-25). God had actually told Abraham his descendants would be slaves for four hundred years, but that he would deliver them (Genesis 15:13-14). Joseph believed that would happen, and so he instructed that his bones be brought back into the promised land, because he believed that God was still going to fulfill his promise, even as Joseph looked around and saw his whole family living in Egypt.

In what ways had God already shown his faithfulness to Isaac? Jacob? Joseph? In what ways does God show his faithfulness to us?

Do you know of any examples of those who lived faithful lives all the way until the very end, some in light of great difficulties?

Application – We cling to God’s promises

What about you? Do you cling to the promises of God? Do you believe that what God has said, He will do? Do you have Abraham like-logic, that when you don’t see how things will line up, you just assume God’s thought of something you haven’t, because you know He doesn’t go back on His Word? Will you keep believing until the end, like Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph?

What are some promises that God has made to us that we can cling to in the difficult times of life?

Do you believe that God will. . .

- Work all things together for good? (Romans 8:28)
- Never leave you nor forsake? (Hebrews 13:5)
- Build his church? (Matthew 16:18)
- Give you the grace you need? (2 Corinthians 12:9)
- Supply all of your needs? (Philippians 4:19)
- Forgive all your sins, every time? (1 John 1:9)
- Give wisdom when you need it? (James 1:5-8)
- Give peace? (John 14:27)
- Provide eternal rewards? (John 14:1-3)

We must anchor our souls on these promises. We must cling to them and realize that we will never have to wonder if our Father will come through. May we live a life of faith that clings to the promises of God even in the darkest most confusing times of our souls, and that endures right up until the very end.