**Bethel Christian Fellowship**

**Fair Lawn, NJ**

**Hebrews (36): The Book Of Better Things**

**“Abraham’s Greatest Trial”
Hebrews 11:17-19**

**February 23, 2025**

The purpose of Hebrews 11 is to encourage us in our own personal journeys of faith. As our author has said in Hebrews 10:36, “*You have need of endurance*” (ESV). He will say it again in Hebrews 12:1, “*Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us*” (ESV). To endure in the face of pressure, persecution, and suffering, we will need the kind of faith that is modeled for us in the men and women our author has listed here in Hebrews 11.

Today, we are looking at what is perhaps the most stunning example of faith in this remarkable chapter. As difficult as it may have been for Noah to believe that God called him to build an ark because of a coming flood, or for Sarah to believe that God would enable her to have a child in her old age, those challenges to faith pale in comparison to what God is now asking of Abraham. He is commanding Abraham to sacrifice his “one and only son,” the son on whom all of God’s future promises depended. It's important to reflect for just a moment on what exactly God had promised to Abraham. The account is found in Genesis 17:15-21:

**“*God also said to Abraham, ‘As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.’ Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, ‘Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?’ And Abraham said to God, ‘If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!’ Then God said, ‘Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him into a great nation. But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year.*”** (NIV)

This puts our story in an entirely new light. It’s one thing for God to command Abraham to offer up Ishmael. But for God to command him to sacrifice Isaac, the one of whom God said, “*I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him,*” is something altogether different. How can this be?

The sentence of death pronounced on Isaac appears to be the sentence of death on God’s promise. On the one hand God has said, “*I will establish my covenant with Isaac.”*  On the other hand, God says, “Sacrifice your ‘one-and-only’ son.” How could those two statements, which appear to be completely contradictory, possibly come from the same God? And if they did, how can such a God be trusted – or obeyed?

The answer to those questions lies in the kind of faith Abraham had. *He didn’t understand the situation he was in*, but he *knew that God is faith*ful, and *he believed the promise that God had given him*. *How* he believed God would fulfill that promise is what this passage is all about. Although he didn’t know why God was leading him in this direction, he knew that God *was* leading him, and that God *would* enable him to endure the greatest trial of his life. That takes faith!

The story is told in Genesis 22:1-19, which the author of Hebrews compresses into three brief verses. At the same time, he provides his divinely inspired interpretation of the event. Here’s his account of the story: “*By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, ‘It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.’ Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death*” (11:17-19, NIV). There are at least seven important insights that we can glean from these verses, all of which are foundational to our understanding of what it means to walk by faith, especially during the most severe trials of life.

***First*,** this story is about a *test*. But it’s not the kind of test that we frequently find in Scripture, which introduces us to some adversity or hardship that we must endure (Cf. James 1:2; 1 Peter 1:6-7). This is a *test of obedience* to a clear commandment of the Lord. God had *commanded* Abraham to offer his beloved son as a sacrifice on Mount Moriah (Gen. 22:1-2; 2 Chron. 3:1). Would he go to the place God had told him to go, and would he take Isaac with him? This story, then, provides us with an important lesson about the Lord’s dealings with us. He tests us by calling us to obey the commands of His Word – even the ones we would rather He didn’t!

***Second*,** the purpose of the test was to determine the *quality* of Abraham’s faithfulness; to what *extent* was he willing to “trust and obey?” His response exemplifies an obedient faith *at great cost*. He was willing to hold nothing back *and* to give God whatever He asked, trusting that “the Lord would provide.” Somehow, in some way, He knew that God would come through.

***Third*,** there isn’t the slightest hint in this story that Abraham wavered in his faith or doubted God’s Word. Think of what he could have said, **(1)** “Lord, would you mind running that by me one more time?” or **(2)** “Lord, why me?” or **(3)** “Lord, I’ll do this for you if . . .” or **(4)**“Lord, I’ve already given up so much. Surely you know by now that I am your faithful, obedient servant;” or **(5)** “Lord, it pains me to say this, but my answer is absolutely, unequivocally, No! I’m not doing that!”

***Fourth*,** the pressure on Abraham must have been unimaginably intense. As our author reminds us, Isaac was Abraham’s “*only son*” (ESV), or “*only begotten son*” (NASB), or “*one and only son*” (NIV). Abraham did have another son (Ishmael, Gen. 16:5); thus, the word “only begotten son” designates Isaac as Abraham’s *unique* son. He was the son who was “one of a kind,” in the sense of being Abraham’s only heir, through whom the covenant promises would be fulfilled (Gen. 21:12; 22:15-18; 25:5). He was the son of whom God had said, “*Through Isaac shall your offspring be named*” (v. 18; Gen. 21:12).

***Fifth*,** it’s evident from the Genesis account that Isaac was the son for whom Abraham had a *special* love. Listen to how God gave His command to Abraham: “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 . . .” (Gen. 22:2). It’s as if God is reminding Abraham of just how precious Isaac is to his heart. He is the son “whom you love.”

***Sixth*,** anytime we suffer the loss of a family member whom we have dearly loved, the loss is devastating. But nothing can compare with the pain of having to bury a son or a daughter. To lose a child is in a category all to itself. But Abraham faced the added horror of his beloved son dying by his own hand. It’s one thing to be told that your child will die prematurely of cancer, or kidney failure, or of a drug overdose. But for God to tell Abraham that *he* is the one who will put Isaac to death is unimaginable. The heart- wrenching anguish within Abraham’s soul is something more than we can fathom.

***Seventh*,** Abraham truly understood that God is omnipotent; he knew there were no limits to His power. And He knew that God is always good and trustworthy and therefore will always be faithful to what He has promised. Thus, he believed that if God really intended him to carry through with the sacrifice of his son, He would most assuredly bring him back from the dead. We read this, of course, in verse 19; “*He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back*” (ESV).

There are at least three essential ingredients to this verse that are especially deserving of our attention. **(a)** The author of Hebrews is not reading something into the Old Testament story that is not already there. In Genesis 22:5 we are told, “*Then Abraham said to his servants, ‘Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship* ***and then we will come back to you***.” Abraham, the man of faith and “*the father of all who believe*” (Rom. 4:11), believed at that point that God would be faithful to His word. Whatever was going to happen on Mount Moriah, Abraham never questioned or doubted that God had the power to raise up a glorious posterity through Isaac – and thus fulfill His promises to him.

**(b)** Abraham “considered” (NASB) or “reasoned” (NIV) that God could even raise Isaac from the dead. That means that *Abraham was contemplating the power of God, based on his previous experiences with God*. Surely, he must have reflected on how Isaac was conceived in the womb of Sarah. If God was able to create Isaac through the bodies of a ninety-year-old woman and a 100-year-old man, why would it be impossible for Him to bring him back from the dead? “In the final analysis,” writes one author, “Isaac would be brought back twice from the dead, once from Sarah’s dead womb and once again from the high altar” (Allen P. Ross, Creation and Blessing: Genesis).

**(c)** The author says, “*In a manner of speaking*” (NIV) or “*figuratively speaking*” (ESV) God *did* raise Isaac from the dead. **Q.** What does this mean? **A.** In Abraham’s mind, when the angel of the Lord prevented him from executing Isaac (Gen. 22:11-12), it was *as if* he was truly raised from the dead. As far as Abraham was concerned, at that point Isaac *was as good as dead*. In that sense, he genuinely received Isaac back from the dead – not in a literal sense but in a figurative sense.

By way of application, it’s obvious that this test carried Abraham to the *limits* of his emotions. It called for him to surrender to God the one person he loved the most and had waited so long for – the heir of the promises. The *principle of sacrifice* is therefore revealed here: God does not ask us to give Him what we do *not* treasure, or what we *no longer* care for or need. Rather, He requires that we offer Him the *best* that we have. In the Old Testament, for example, He demanded that the first-born be given to Him (Cf. Ex. 22:29). Today, He asks us to give the first day of the week (Acts 20:7) and the first fruits of our incomes (Prov. 3:9-10; 1 Cor. 16:1-2).

The New Testament also gives us a *corresponding* *sacrifice* that God demands of believers today. Jesus’ requirement of forsaking one’s family, leaving all and following Him is but one example that comes to mind; “*If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes, and even their own life – such a person cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple*” (Luke 14:26-27; Cf. Matt. 10:37-39). To “hate father and mother” is a vivid hyperbole, meaning that any follower of Jesus Christ must love Him even more than their immediate family.

That’s hard to do for many of us today, which is why it’s a “sacrifice.” It is similar to Abraham’s test of obedience in Genesis 22. If anyone desires to be a true follower of Christ, it will involve a *willingness* to sacrifice whatever is dearest and most treasured to us. That’s the “take away” from this remarkable story of this remarkable man of faith.

“All to Jesus I surrender,

All to Him I freely give;

May I ever love and trust Him,

In His presence daily live.

I surrender all; I surrender all.

All to Thee, my blessed Savior,

I surrender all.”

(Judson W. VanDeVenter, 1896)