

*Hebrews 11:8-12, 17-19 (NRSV)*

<sup>8</sup>By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. <sup>9</sup>By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. <sup>10</sup>For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. <sup>11</sup>By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. <sup>12</sup>Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.”

<sup>17</sup>By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, <sup>18</sup>of whom he had been told, “It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you.” <sup>19</sup>He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

*Romans 4:1-5 (NRSV)*

What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? <sup>2</sup>For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. <sup>3</sup>For what does the scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” <sup>4</sup>Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. <sup>5</sup>But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness.

*The seven holy habits help to form us into a Christlike people, a faithful people. Today, we consider the example of Abraham, whose faith, and the obedience that flowed from it, made him right with God.*

For many Christians, Hebrews is largely a closed book. Its pages are filled with talk of ancient and mysterious Israelite sacrifices, priests, and rituals. Who in the world is Melchizedek we ask, and what does this have to do with Jesus (Hebrews 7:15-19)? We have trouble making sense of Hebrews because we have trouble making sense of the Old Testament and Hebrews is *thoroughly* grounded in the history of the Israelites and their temple-centered religion. Understanding the significance of calling Jesus “a high priest of the good things that have come” (9:11) requires that we know something about a high priest’s job description.

But there is one portion of Hebrews that nearly all Christians know: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible” (11:1-3). From there, the writer goes on to lift up to the reader numerous “heroes” of the Old Testament who demonstrated their faith in God and its power through their actions. Fred Craddock reminds us that none of these people lived their lives as examples. Indeed, playing to an audience would have disqualified them as examples of faith. Further, their faith was not simply belief that God exists, but that God “rewards those who seek him” (11:6). Without this active, obedient, seeking faith, it is “impossible to please God” (11:6). Thus, the heroes in Hebrews 11 are people who pleased God by seeking him in faith. Ups and downs along the way. Joy and disappointments for sure. But always seeking God and striving to trust God in all things.

*Abraham*

It is no surprise that Abraham gets more space in Hebrews than anyone else. Abraham’s story is not only foundational to all that follows in the history of God and his people, Abraham demonstrated his trust of God time after time.

- God tells Abraham to leave his home and family to go to Canaan and he goes.

- God tells Abraham that he will have numerous descendents, despite the fact that Abraham and Sarah are both approaching the century-mark. “And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6).
- God tells Abraham to sacrifice the son born to himself and Sarah, the child through whom the covenant will pass. And Abraham offers his son to God, knowing that God could and would, figuratively, raise the boy from the dead. (Genesis 22; see the text boxes for more on this remarkable story).

When the writer of Genesis says that God reckoned Abraham’s faith to him as righteousness (15:6; also in Romans 4:3), it is a way of saying that Abraham’s faith enabled the restoration of God and Abraham’s relationship. Their relationship becomes as God hoped it would be. So much so that Abraham even bargains with God over the judgment to fall on Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:16-33).

### The Sacrifice of Isaac

The faithful obedience of Abraham is starkly demonstrated when God commands him to sacrifice his son Isaac (Genesis 22). The writer of Hebrews uses this story to drive home the depth of Abraham’s faith and what it accomplished. However, if there is a more puzzling, important, and disturbing story in Scripture, I don’t know what it is. In his commentary on the book of Hebrews, R. Kent Hughes offers us an insightful analysis of the writer of Hebrews use of this difficult story:

The story of Abraham’s offering of Isaac is, of course, a story of towering faith. The author states implicitly that Abraham’s faith produced *immediate obedience* because the phrase, “when God tested him [he] offered” (Heb. 11:17) indicates that his obedience came at the same instant he heard the call to offer Isaac. The Genesis account corroborates this when it says, “Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey” (Gen. 22:3). He did not stall, and he did not procrastinate. There was no arguing with God, no bargaining, no equivocating . . . his obedience was immediate and explicit. Though every fiber of his natural being rebelled against what God was calling him to do, though his feet felt like lead, he did not turn aside.

Not only that, but he really did “sacrifice” Isaac. The Greek perfect tense is used when the text says that he “offered Isaac as a sacrifice”—and the perfect tense refers to a completed action in past time. This means that the *sacrifice actually took place* as far as Abraham’s resolve and obedience were concerned. From the divine perspective, as well as from Abraham’s perspective, Abraham did it! But immediately the *same* verb is used in the imperfect tense in the following statement—he “was about to sacrifice his one and only son”—indicating that it did not physically happen. The point is, in terms of obedience to God, Abraham did it. He completely offered his beloved Isaac, the laughter and joy of his life.

(continued in page three text box)

In Romans 4, Paul wants his readers to understand that with God, it had always been about faith. It was faith that restored Abraham to a right relationship with God, not circumcision or Sabbath-keeping or any of the other “works of the law” that would come later.<sup>1</sup>

*What about us?*

Of course, I could also list Abraham’s lapses of faith. The time he passed his wife off as his own sister, sending her to the house of Pharaoh (Gen. 12:10-20). Or when he and Sarah took matters into their own hands and decided to use a servant girl, Hagar, to give Abraham an heir.

We know that this is the nature of faith, ups and down. We struggle with doubts and disobedience. Kent Hughes quotes a Spanish philosopher, Miguel de Unamuno, on this: “Those who believe that they believe in God, but without passion in their hearts, without anguish in mind, without uncertainty, without doubt, without an element of despair even in their consolation, believe only in the God idea, not God Himself.”

We embrace the holy habits because they are, in part, means by which we become more faithful to God, more faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. This is how we come to trust God ever more deeply, not just with the little stuff in our lives, but in the difficult times when faith seems so elusive and God’s purposes so hidden.

<sup>1</sup>It is crucial to understand that Paul’s use of Genesis 15:6 in chapter 4 of his letter to the Romans is there to demonstrate that righteousness was Abraham’s by virtue of his faith, even before God taught him the rite of circumcision as a sign of the covenant. And it happens centuries before the Law was brought down from the mountain by Moses. Thus, the “works of the law” which were revealed to the Israelites, such as circumcision, could not be the basis of a restored relationship with God. That happens through faith. And it is a faith available to everyone, not merely those who were given the Law.

Faith's Reasoning  
(R. Kent Hughes continued)

Hughes' very helpful commentary on this story continues with this fascinating explanation of what the writer of Hebrews means in verse 19 of today's passage. This is lengthy, but worth chewing over:

How was Abraham able to do this? Our text [from Hebrews] gives the memorable answer, "[Abraham] considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back" (v. 19). The word for "considered" is *logisamenos*, from which we get the word *logarithm*. It means "to calculate or compute." The idea is that Abraham used his stores of logic to reason the situation out. He didn't indulge in *fideism*—faith without reason, blind faith. He was eminently logical—almost mathematical—in his reasoning.

And his logic was audacious. God had said that Abraham would have children as numerous as the stars and the sand—and Abraham believed God (Gen. 15:5-6). God had said that through Isaac, the great covenant and blessing would come—and Abraham believed God even though his body was "as good as dead" (Heb. 11:12). Abraham knew Isaac had come through a miraculous prophetic fulfillment of God's word. He also knew Isaac had no children and, in fact, was not even married. Yet God had clearly told him to sacrifice Isaac. There was no mistake or misunderstanding. Therefore, Isaac was as good as dead! And from Abraham's perspective it was now God's problem, for God's word through Isaac had to be fulfilled. Abraham's breathtaking logic was: God could and would raise the dead. There had never been a resurrection, but he knew God *had* to bring Isaac back to life. There was no other way. God would keep his word! "Stay here with the donkey, he told his servants, "while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you" (Gen. 22:5).

Think of this in the context of the categories Hebrews 11 supplies. Abraham's faith rested upon *the greatness of God*. He believed that God "exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him" (v. 6). Abraham's faith also was grounded on *the creative power of God*. By faith he understood "that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible" (v. 3). He knew that God could bring forth the living out of nothing. In fact, his body had been "as good as dead" when he fathered Isaac (v. 12). Abraham's faith was characterized with the *dynamic certitude* of verse 1: "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" So certain was he of God's promise through Isaac that he saw it as present!

When God creates the cosmos in the opening chapter of Genesis, God speaks creation into existence. God says, Let there be light! And there is light. When God says it, it's done. When God tells Abraham and Sarah that they are going to have a child, despite the fact that Sarah is far too old, it is done. Not just as good as done. Done. God's promise makes Isaac a present reality, even though he is not yet born.

Thus, since Isaac is the child of the promise, Abraham concludes that though he has offered him to God as a sacrifice, yet shall Isaac live. It just has to be that way. It is that way. This is God that Abraham trusts. Abraham *already* has his son back, even though they gave *not yet* reached the place of the sacrifice. Already, not yet. This challenges our imaginations, as it must have challenged Abraham's. Reality is much larger than the cosmos you and I can see and touch.

## READING WITH HEART & MIND, MAR 2 — MAR 8

**Monday, Genesis 12** God calls Abram and makes three promises to him: a land, numerous descendents, and that *all* the families on earth would be blessed through him. It is this last promise that is often forgotten but is the key to understanding God's redeeming work and the charge given us by Jesus Christ.

**Tuesday, Genesis 17** God gives Abraham a sign of God's covenant: circumcision. Note that this comes *after* God promises Abraham countless descendents and pronounces him righteous because of his faith.

**Wednesday, Genesis 18:1-15** God again promises a child to Abraham and Sarah.

**Thursday, Genesis 22** God commands Abraham to sacrifice his miracle child, Isaac.

**Friday, Romans 4** Paul uses Abraham's story to show that we have always been made right with God by virtue of faith.

**Saturday, Hebrews 11:8-22** The entire passage about the faith of Abraham.

## Sermon Notes

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### **Continuing This Sunday! *Exploring World Religions***

**Taught by Scott Engle at 11:00 in Festival Hall on Sunday morning**

This series is an introduction to the major world religions – but with a twist!  
Join us any week that you can, as each week will stand on its own.

**This week: Mormonism    Next week: Jehovah's Witnesses, Scientology, & more**

### **The Sermon Background Studies Archive**

Looking for old sermon background studies? All the background studies that have been written, about 300 of them, are available on-line at [www.thebibleacademy.com](http://www.thebibleacademy.com). The studies are also available by e-mail. If you would like to receive the studies by e-mail each week, just send an e-mail to the following address:  
[sa\\_studies-subscribe@yahogroups.com](mailto:sa_studies-subscribe@yahogroups.com).

## **Questions for Discussion and Reflection**

The writer of Hebrews doesn't talk to us about faith using propositions or ideas. Rather, he sends us back to numerous biblical stories of faith. Beginning with the stories of Abel and Cain and going all the way to David and then the prophets, the writer invites us to step within these stories. There, we find all the joys and disappointments, victories and defeats, that characterize our own faith journeys.

In God's wisdom, he has given us a library of writings, the Bible, that is largely a collection of stories about God, about his creation, and about ourselves. They are stories that beg us to use our imagination for we can enter a story in ways that we could never get into a book of systematic theology. These stories are given to us so that, through them, we might come to know God better, to live in a right and loving relationship with him who made us. So, here's a few questions to ask yourself as you try to step within the story of Abraham and Sarah. You may want to read Genesis 12-22 first, if it's been awhile. If you are new to these stories, you might consider first reading these chapters in Peterson's *The Message*.

- Imagine that you are Abraham and you believe that God has told you to leave everything behind to head for a foreign land. What do you think your reaction would be? How would you even know it was God calling you? How would Abraham know? After all, even hearing voices doesn't tell us everything – we medicate that! Do you think something remarkable must have happened within Abraham's heart? How hard must it have been for him to head out?
- Even better, imagine that you are Sarah. You are in your eighties and your husband comes home announcing that he is going to have an heir – by you! You might laugh as Sarah did. You might even take things into your own hands like Sarah. How could you trust your spouse enough? How could you trust God enough? In Sarah's mind, what might this promise cost her?

You might also look through the stories of Abraham and see where he practiced the seven holy habits. Does he invite? worship? learn? pray? care? give? serve? I think you'll be surprised to discover that the habits of Jesus' disciples have always been the habits of God's people. That makes sense to me. Does it to you? Why? Or why not?