

A TEST OF FAITH
HEBREWS 11:17-19

More than 30 years ago, I walked out of a classroom and building, and crossed the street to head to the school-owned apartment in which Raye Jeanne and I lived. It was a pleasant early May day, with bright sunshine and moderate temperature. As I crossed the street, I distinctly remember thinking, “I have taken the last exam I’ll ever take...” No more tests, no more cramming for finals, no more papers or book reviews. One or two nights later, I was reading a book I didn’t find beneficial and I thought, “Hey! You don’t have to read this — no one is going to ask if you’ve read it!” And I put it down with great satisfaction.

I had arrived at my happy place — learning and feeding my intellectual curiosities without testing.

How wrong I was. I didn’t realize it then, but I likely read more now than I did in seminary — and I write “papers” every week, and there is a final every Sunday morning — and any other time I teach. And then there are a wide variety of questions from people that I am expected to know and be able to give guidance.

And there are the other tests of life — what will I say when I am defrauded or criticized?, how will I respond when unexpected bills arrive (like a vet bill, medical, expense, or car repair)?, and what will my attitude be when I don’t get what I want — when desires are unmet (which *will* happen)?

Trials are inevitable. Difficulty and problems are various and frequent. There is no time in the spiritual life when we can expect ease and escape from tests and trials. How will we respond? The goal (as Hebrews 11) teaches us, is to respond in dependent faith on God, trusting that He will see us through the tests and take us to His heavenly kingdom. In Hebrews 11:17-19, the writer provides instruction about responding to tests through the life of Abraham:

SPIRITUAL TESTS ARE INEVITABLE (AND PLANNED BY GOD).

WHEN TESTED, CONTINUE TO RESPOND OBEDIENTLY TO GOD’S DIRECTION FOR YOU.

The example of Abraham reveals **three aspects of our tests**:

1. The **REALITY** of Testing (v. 17a)
2. The **ANSWER** for Testing (vv. 17b-19a)
 - ✓ **OBEY** God’s Precepts (vv. 17b)
 - ✓ **REMEMBER** God’s Promises (vv. 17c-18)
 - ✓ Be **CONFIDENT** in God’s Power (v. 19a)
3. The **REWARD** in Testing (v. 19b)

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1. The **REALITY** of Testing (v. 17a)

- We saw this last week: **all these died in faith without receiving the promises...** (v. 13). There are disappointments in life. And sometimes it's worse than mere "disappointments."
 - ✓ Some of you may remember the married comedy team of George Burns and Gracie Allen. On one occasion, Gracie received a small, live alligator as a gag gift. Not knowing what to do with the alligator, she put it in a bathtub and then left for an appointment. When she returned, she found a note from her housekeeper: "Dear Miss Allen: Sorry, but I have quit. I don't work in houses where there is an alligator. I'd a told you this when I [started], but I never thought it would come up."
 - ✓ There are many things in life that we never think would come up, as one writer notes:

"Our world isn't paradise. Our jobs are stressful, taxing, and unfulfilling. Our relationships are quarrelsome. We get cancer. We break bones, throw up, and get hemorrhoids. We feel nervous, afraid, angry, and upset. The Holocaust happens. 9/11 happens. Poverty, genocide, and starvation happen. Terrorists set off bombs. Our cars hit potholes. Books are ridiculously difficult to write. We go years without speaking to relatives. Divorce splits families. Hurricanes, tsunamis, and earthquakes destroy the planet. Love fades. World peace is a clichéd impossibility. We get wrinkles, zits, sunspots, and bald spots. We rarely smile. We rarely laugh. We rarely let loose and play. Our minds fail us. Our hearts ache. We constantly itch for more. Eventually we die. The world as we know it is anything but paradise." [Steve Hoppe, *Sipping Saltwater*, 14.]

- Having provided a summary of the lessons learned so far in the center of the chapter (vv. 13-16), the writer returns to the example of Abraham. Notice how trouble was interjected into Abraham's life:
 - ✓ **By faith Abraham...** The pattern of introducing Abraham is the same as it was earlier in the chapter — and it serves to remind us that even in extreme hardship, Abraham trusted God.
 - ✓ By returning to the example of Abraham, the writer reminds the readers that Abraham's faith was not theoretical. Abraham acted in very real and practical ways.
 - ✓ Then notice the next phrase: **when he was tested**. The writer places it there almost matter-of-factly. He seems to assume that this is not only a well-known story, but that the testing of Abraham was nothing unusual. His circumstance, while hard and unusual, was normal in that all are tested.
 - The word **tested** is a present tense, "Abraham, being tested..." It suggests that this testing was more than just a one-time test, but that this testing was ongoing —
 - ... The command/test from God came on one day (Gen. 22:1-2).
 - ... Abraham didn't leave until the next day (22:3), providing opp's to question during night.
 - ... The journey took several days (22:4), giving Abraham multiple opp's to turn back.
 - ... Abraham and Isaac walked alone (22:6, 9) for a time, making more tests.

... If Abraham wasn't asking questions in his mind, then Isaac questioned him (22:7).

... Abraham had to bind and lift his son on the altar (v. 9).

... The test had multiple facets over multiple days; it was ongoing (*relentless?*).

➤ The test also came from God (which 22:1 clearly states). God was behind the test. But don't take that to mean that God was doing it for His own benefit — "what kind of man is Abraham; is he faithful to Me?" The test was for the benefit of Abraham, so that Abraham could see what kind of man he was (and what he needed to change or grow towards).

- ✓ While the writer doesn't use the word, it is probably appropriate to use the word "crisis" for Abraham's test. "Crisis" has been defined this way: "The most common characterization of a crisis involves an unstable situation of extreme danger or difficulty or a crucial stage or turning point in the course of an event." [Babler.] That was definitely Abraham's situation — extreme difficulty.
- ✓ But from God's standpoint, a crisis always has a purpose — to accomplish something spiritually.
- ✓ *What was behind Abraham's crisis?* It was a test to see if Abraham would obey even if he didn't understand God's command and if he would trust what God had previously revealed to him. Abraham could not rationalize what God might do — he had no previous example to look at (like we do with other resurrections); likewise, while tests are various, often the question is "will I follow what God says even if I can't understand what is ahead or how God might be glorified?"
- ✓ But Abraham's test was also a gift to demonstrate that God is faithful to His people and His Word.

- **Summary/application:**

- ✓ **Our testings** (even a crisis) do not mean that something has gone wrong (1 Cor. 10:13).
- ✓ **Our testings** always give us an opportunity to have our heart motives revealed (J.s. 1:13-14).
- ✓ **Our testings** always give us an opportunity to be transformed (sanctified; J.s. 1:2-4; Rom. 8:29).
- ✓ **The testings** we endure always give us an opportunity to be grateful for our identification with Christ (1 Pt. 4:12-13).
- ✓ **Our testings** may come to us as crises, but they also demonstrate the faithfulness of God to Himself and to us (He won't act contradictory to His nature; 1 Cor. 10:13b).

"Life is not a straight line leading from one blessing to the next and then finally to heaven. Life is a winding and troubled road Switchback after switchback. And the point of biblical stories like Joseph and Job and Esther and Ruth is to help us feel in our bones (not just know in our heads) that God is for us in all these strange turns."

[John Piper, *A Sweet & Bitter Providence*]

2. The ANSWER for Testing (vv. 17b-19a)

• OBEY God's Precepts (vv. 17b)

- ✓ Abraham's actions in verse 17 (Gen. 22) are stunning.
 - When our children were young, we spent much time working on immediate, first-time obedience. The process seemed to be achingly slow before they learned.
 - There is no hesitation in Abraham's obedience in this section — and the account in Genesis is the same; Abraham obeyed immediately, without hesitation, and without complaint (22:3).
 - He seemed to be losing everything, and yet he did not stop to argue, complain, or grieve.
- ✓ The passage tells us that he **offered up Isaac...**
 - The verb "offered up" is emphatic in the sentence: "By faith, *offered up* (Abraham), Isaac when he was tested." The writer wants us to understand that Abraham's act of offering was what it meant for him to live by faith in that moment (and if he had not offered him up, it would have been faithlessness).
 - The word is also in a tense that means that from Abraham's perspective, the sacrifice was complete — he had offered his son, without holding anything back from the Lord.
 - Later in the verse the writer uses the present tense: **was offering**, indicating that it was settled in his mind (first verb) and he was actively engaged in offering Isaac (second verb).
 - This is probably a good time to also address a question that isn't answered either in this passage or in Genesis 22, but is *always* asked by readers: how could God, who later revealed laws against murder and human sacrifices, ask Abraham to sacrifice his son?
 - While we read v. 2 as a command, we should also read the whole story and recognize that God's intention was always that Abraham's hand would be stayed and Isaac would not be sacrificed (v. 12a). There was no question about the possibility of God accepting such a sacrifice because the promise (v. 18) made the sacrifice impossible. [Guthrie] The issue was whether Abraham treasured his son more than he feared (worshipped & trusted) God (v. 12b).
- ✓ This account of Abraham and Isaac is a reminder that faithfulness is always dependent on obedience (no one can be disobedient and faithful).
 - Will I obey Him when I cannot understand why I should obey or how it honors Him — when it doesn't seem to make sense to me? (Remember the description of faith, v. 1.)
 - Do I believe that God has a right to take away the things I treasure? Am I willing to be obedient even when I lose what I "treasure?"
 - The test for Abraham (as is often with our tests as well), is "what do you treasure?" "What do you want?" "Do you want your son, or do you want faithfulness to God?"

• **REMEMBER God's Promises (vv. 17c-18)**

- ✓ The writer tells us that Abraham offered up Isaac — and then reminds the readers who Isaac was, in case they had forgotten or were overlooking the key part of the story. Vv. 17c-18 are essential to understanding one of the main points of the writer.
 - ***He who had received the promises...*** means that while the promise was *about* Isaac's birth (Gen. 18:10), the promise was made *to* Abraham.
 - Not only had the promise been made *to* Abraham, but he ***received*** that promise; that is, he *welcomed and cherished* the promise — it denotes joyful trust in the promise.
 - The promise of God was not just that Abraham would have a son (he already had one in Ishmael) but that he would have one with Sarah, who would be the means of fulfilling the covenant promises from Genesis 12:1-3. That's what the writer means by ***only begotten son***; Isaac was not the only son, but he was the unique son that fulfilled the covenant (21:12). Only Isaac could fulfill the covenant and if Isaac died childless, the covenant could not be fulfilled.
- ✓ It is that passage in Genesis 21 that the writer quotes in v. 18 — it was in Isaac, and no one else that God would fulfill the Abrahamic covenant.
 - Many writers have suggested that there was a significant emotional dilemma for Abraham about the promise (21:12) and then the command (22:2). Abraham surely was in "turmoil."
 - Except neither Moses (in Genesis) nor this writer give any suggestion of any such turmoil. Abraham is resolute and committed to obey.
 - In fact, one writer says, "the impression...is that Abraham treated it as *God's problem*; it was for God, and not for Abraham, to reconcile his promise and his command. So, when the command was given, Abraham promptly set about obeying it; his own duty was clear, and God could safely be trusted to discharge his responsibility in the matter." [Bruce; my emphasis]
- ✓ The test for Abraham was not just whether he would obey God when tested, but whether he would also continue to believe that God would fulfill His promises in spite of the (apparent) death of the one through whom the promises were to be fulfilled. Would Abraham remember and trust God?
- ✓ The readers were being tempted to leave Christ and go back to Judaism; the writer is reminding them that when God has made promises, even if we can't see how, *they will be fulfilled* (10:34-36).
- ✓ When are you tempted to despair, be despondent, depressed? When are you tempted to give up on the faith? What are the situations that seem impossible to overcome? *Remember God's promises*. E.g.,
 - When there is suffering, God has something better ahead (Heb. 11:40)
 - Jesus is the perfecter of our faith and He has secured His place on the throne to do that (12:2)
 - Even when we are disciplined, a godly response will produce ***peaceful fruit of righteousness*** (12:11)
 - The Kingdom in which we participate cannot be shaken or overthrown (12:22, 28)
 - God will never forsake those who are His (no matter how it appears, 13:5b-6, 14)
- ✓ Abraham did not know *how* but he knew *who* — He remembered the nature of God and His promises.

• Be **CONFIDENT** in God's Power (v. 19a)

- ✓ While remembering God's promises, Abraham **considered** — he “reckoned, calculated” the nature and character of God and came to a simple conclusion: “God can do this.” We say that somewhat flippantly: “God's got this.” But Abraham staked all his hopes and his son's life on that confidence.
- ✓ Not only did he say, **God is able** (in a general sense), but Abraham believed that God was specifically able to **raise people from the dead**.
 - We believe in the resurrection because we have multiple examples in Scripture, esp. Christ.
 - Abraham had *no* example of anyone having been raised from the dead (though he would have known that Enoch was taken directly to Heaven).
 - Yet he did have a kind of example of resurrection: his own body (**Rom. 4:19-21**). God had made life (Isaac) from a “dead man,” so he reasoned he could also literally give life to a dead man.
- ✓ “If this boy dies, everything in the human experience says, the promise of God will fail.” [Piper] It is imperative that Isaac stays alive. Abraham believed and obeyed because he was confident in God and understood that God was not bound by natural law; God can act beyond our abilities (Eph. 4:20).
- ✓ We have been focusing on the obedience of Abraham in these verses, but notice this: “The proof of Abraham's faith was his willingness to give back to God everything he had, including the son of promise, whom he had miraculously received *because* of his faith. After all the waiting and wondering, the son had been given by God. Then, before the son was grown, God asked for him back, and Abraham obeyed.” [MacArthur] His faith was the means of Abraham's salvation (Gen. 15:6), led to the provision of a son (Gen. 21:1ff), and now the “return” of the son (v. 19b) — all these are a demonstration of Abraham's belief in the power and ability of God.
- ✓ Do you believe that God is able to meet your need? Are you confident in Him?
 - That He is able to fulfill His promises to you? That He is *willing* to fulfill His promises?
 - That He is able to give spiritual life to your spiritually dead spouse, child, parent, neighbor?
 - That He is able to protect your life and bring you safely into His eternal Kingdom?
 - “God knows me more than I know myself. God loves me more than I love myself. God is more committed to my ultimate joy than I am. So I can trust Him.” [Allberry] Be confident...*in Him*.

3. The **REWARD** in Testing (v. 19b)

- We often want to know, “what is the payoff? what is the benefit of trusting God?”
- The writer tells us that **from this** circumstance Abraham **received him back as a type** (lit., “parable”).
 - ✓ It's tempting to think that the writer means as a type of the ultimate resurrection (Jesus) — or maybe even of our future resurrection.
 - ✓ I think that is reading something more into this verse than he intends.
 - ✓ He simply means that because Abraham already considered that the offering of Isaac was completed (v. 17a), when Isaac was spared, it was *as if* Isaac was resurrected.

- ✓ Isaac died a figurative death and was given a figurative resurrection.
- ✓ Abraham “had given his son unreservedly to God, and got him back again.” [Kent]
- We should not infer from this that God will always keep us from dying (death is still 1/1). We should not be confident that God will always replace every loss with a replacement or even a double blessing (like Job). We should not believe that we will be spared trials and troubles.
- That is not the writer’s intent.
 - ✓ Notice the word **receive** (v. 19). It’s only used a few times in the NT — it can mean “to come into possession” or “to get back, be restored.” So Isaac was “restored” to Abraham. The word is used two more times in Hebrews — one time in **v. 39** — there are trials on this earth, there is death, and not all losses are replaced on earth. This re-affirms **10:32-33** — there may be unrestored loss.
 - ✓ But the other place **receive** is used in Hebrews is in **10:36** — whatever God has promised, we can be sure that we will receive it from Him.
 - ✓ God is always faithful to His nature and will always do what is good and beneficial for us.
 - ✓ Paul captures the tension between loss on this earth and trust in the care of God in **2 Tim. 4:18**. Sometimes rescue in this world is by means of transfer to the next world. And then we will know real blessing, real joy, and real reward.

CONCLUSION: There is no one in this world that does not suffer. Like death, suffering is 1/1.

“The cross is laid on every Christian...**When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die**...Suffering then, is the badge of true discipleship. The disciple is not above his master...That is why Luther reckoned suffering among the marks of the true church...If we refuse to take up our cross and submit to suffering and rejection at the hands of men, we forfeit our fellowship with Christ and have ceased to follow him.” [Bonhoeffer, *Cost of Discipleship*; quoted by Coekin, 72.]

These trials and tests are also a gift to us from God — they are designed to reveal the nature of our hearts and stimulate us to obey God and believe Him, even when we cannot see all He is doing.

All of God’s promises will be accomplished. Maybe you are being tested today. As hard as the test may be, it is for our good, because it will reveal whether we believe His Word and the promises that we have read in His Word. **Have faith. He is good to fulfill His Word.**

BENEDICTION: **Hebrews 13:20-21**