

Tested and True, Hebrews 11:17-22, 7/14/19 Steve Harden

“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.” He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.” Hebrews 11:17-22.

It’s well documented in Scripture that God tests the faith of His people. Not only in Scripture, but it’s well established in our experience as well. God tests the faith of His people. And there’s nowhere that we find faith so tested as it was with Abraham; think back with me. He was promised a land that he would possess, and yet Abraham would spend his life living in tents. Isaac, his son, would never own a piece of that land, and Jacob, his grandson, would never own any of the land. That was quite a test. Would God keep His word? Would He keep His promise? Then, he was told as we’ve just heard, that he was going to have a son, and he would wait 25 years for that promise to be fulfilled. Sarah was 90, he was 99, that was quite a test. Is he going to believe? Will he continue to believe the promise of God?

But that wasn’t all, let me show you just how severe that test was. Think through it with me. Before God changed his name to Abraham, he was Abram, right? The name Abram means ‘the father of many.’ Now if you’ll think back to the pages in the back of your Bible, and the geography of the holy land, you have Canaan there right beside the sea, you have Egypt down

here, and everything in Asia and Europe up here. Canaan lay right there on the trade route from Egypt to everything north and east. And so, there would have been trade caravans coming through Canaan all the time. Now we know that Abraham was wealthy. He had lots of livestock, gold and silver, servants galore. It just makes sense that these traveling merchants would stop and trade with Abraham, and Abraham would provide hospitality to them.

Now think, they've never met before, and the merchants begin to introduce themselves to Abram. And so, Abram would say, "My name is Abram. Father of many." And you can just see the merchants say, "Ah what a good name, father of many. How many children do you have, Abram?" "Well, we don't have any." Awkward silence. Every time, every time he had to introduce himself, he had to say: "I am a childless man whose name is father of many." So that went on for a long time, but then think what happened when God came to him and said, "Abram, I want to change your name to Abraham." "What are you doing to me, Lord?" Because Abraham means father of many nations or the father of multitudes.

Things didn't get any better for Abraham. Now think about the conversation when he called a family meeting, or a staff meeting, with all of his servants, all of his family around him, and he said, "God changed my name." And I'm sure they said, "Oh right, he's tired of being Abram." Right? "Instead of Abram, it's going to be Abraham." Father of many nations. Can you imagine the snickers and the laughter that he faced? That was a severe test. Would Abraham believe God for a son even when he was 99 years old? Could matters get any worse? The answer is always yes.

So, God gave him a son, Isaac. You know that he was the apple of his father's eye. He loved his son. The son of promise. How he must have doted on his son, how he must have laid

awake at night thinking of God's faithfulness and thinking of ways He might be able to use Isaac, his son. But then came that fateful day, that day when God came to him and said, "Abraham," and Abraham said, "Yes, Lord?" And He said, "Abraham what I want you to do is to take your son up on Mount Moriah, a three days walk, and I want you to tie him on an altar and I want you to put a knife in him, and kill him and use him as a burnt offering." I have no category for that. I can't do anything with that. What would you do? I can't comprehend the agony. But you see, God was testing Abraham's faith. Abraham didn't know he was being tested. He didn't know it. He just knew what God had told him to do. I cannot comprehend the severity of that kind of test.

But my friend, God will test your faith. God will test you. "Do you believe My promises? Do you? Is it all just smoke and mirrors for you, or do you really trust Me?" Now, praise God it's not the kind of test that Abraham had to do. But He still tests. And sometimes, those tests are severe. He puts us in situations and trials and relationships to say, "Do you trust me?" Listen 1Peter 4:12 "Beloved," Peter writes, "Do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed." Don't be surprised, Christian. Don't be surprised.

James 1:12: "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him." And these are but two of the many examples that God tests the faith of His people. It's not a matter of if, it is a matter of when your faith will be tested. For many of us, our faith is being tested right now, right now as we speak. But here in chapter 11 of Hebrews, the writer tells the story of Abraham to encourage the believers in Rome who were facing persecution and perhaps death, to

say, remain steadfast. Believe the promises of God. So, I want to point out just two elements of this story of Abraham and Isaac. The first is to obey, and the second is to think. Obey and think.

First, when your faith is tested, obey. Abraham obeyed. We find this in Genesis 22 when God called to Abraham, immediately he said, “Here am I,” expecting, happy, grateful, enthusiastic, I get to talk with God! But the enthusiasm faded fast when he was instructed to take his son and make him a sacrifice. Verse 2: “He said,” speaking of God, “Take your son, your only son, Isaac.” Now, your only son, Isaac? Don’t you have Ishmael? He was talking about the promised son. Take the one, the promised son here. “Whom you love and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall tell you.” I cannot imagine the horror that Abraham felt when he heard God tell him that he had to go kill his son. I don’t have any words; the terror and dismay must have riddled and shook the old man. But what do we find next? What we find next is that he got up early the next morning, and he saddled his donkey, and he split wood for the sacrifice, and he woke up Isaac, and he started on the three-day journey to Mount Moriah. Amazing obedience.

The text doesn’t tell us that he mentions what he was going to do to Sarah. I just wonder if he even told her. I wouldn’t. I don’t think she would have let him go. Maybe she would’ve. But he didn’t say anything about it. I can imagine that conversation though. How heavy his feet must have been on the journey.

When they arrived at that mountain, he told his servants to stay at the bottom, and only he and Isaac would go to the top. And so, he strapped the wood onto Isaac’s back, and he took the fire, and the knife, and they started climbing. And when they reached the top, they piled up the stones and he arranged the wood just so, and I think at that point he told Isaac: “Isaac, God told

me to sacrifice you.” Now, I say that he told Isaac because Abraham was an old man. He was over 100 years old. Isaac was a young man. He could have outrun him if need be. But I think Isaac trusted his father. And so, Abraham bound him, and he put him on the altar, and he took the knife with every intention to slay his son in obedience.

What we find at this juncture though, is that Abraham obeyed completely and comprehensively. He obeyed fully without hesitation. He did what God told him to do. He didn’t understand; it didn’t make sense. And yet, he obeyed without having all the answers. You don’t have to have the answers. Often, God won’t provide the answers for you; you must obey. When your face is tested, when all hell breaks loose on your soul and all around your life is crumbling, and you don’t know what to do: obey. Simply obey. Even when you don’t understand, even when it doesn’t make sense: obey.

There are so many examples, but as I was pondering this what came to mind is that through the years I’ve worked with many couples who are struggling in their marriage. And a lot of times I cared more about their marriage than they did at this point, we’re talking severe stress, struggle, and so much anger, bitterness, unforgiveness and harsh words going back and forth, so much emotion. But when I think about when they begin to turn the corner, it’s when they accepted God’s word and began to obey. Listen to Romans 12: “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ To the contrary, ‘if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” In that situation, you don’t feel like that, right?

You don't feel like leaving vengeance to the Lord. But it's time to obey. Just obey. You don't have to understand, just obey.

Ephesians 4: "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear... Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you." See when you're angry at your husband, angry at your wife, those kinds of instructions don't come easily. Can we just agree that, no they don't come easy? They're hard. They don't make sense. Somebody is wronging me, especially my spouse or one of my friends, don't take vengeance? What? That doesn't make sense. Nobody does that to me! That's the thought that goes through the mind, right? Nobody does that to me! You treat me like that, watch this! Those are the kinds of thoughts that come through, and yet, God says, "Trust me. Obey the promises. Obey the word. Overcome evil with good. Speak softly. Be kind. Forgive."

You see, when you don't know what else to do, my friend, obey. Just obey. You don't have to understand. Trust the Lord to accomplish what he wants to accomplish through you. Corporately, what do we do when we don't know what else to do? We obey. What does God's word say to do? Simply obey. In the early fall I'm planning on doing a little short series on conflict in relationships, and how to navigate conflict. And I hope it will be helpful, but the whole thing is just based on this, just simply obey. Obey the word. Just obey. So, when your faith is tested, obey.

But secondly, when your faith is tested, think. Abraham's faith was not a blind faith. Abraham's faith was not unthinking or irrational or flippant. No, it was a reasoned, considered

faith. He had three days on the way to Mount Moriah to think a lot, and he did. He thought through every angle of what God had commanded him to do. Hebrews 11:19, Bethany read: “He considered.” And I love this word considered; it’s a transliteration from the original language into our language, it translates ‘logarithm.’ Now think, what does it mean, what do the words consider and logarithm have in common? It means that you calculate or compute. Abraham used the power of reasoning and logic to consider every aspect of his situation. He was extremely logical, almost mathematical, when he reasoned. He asked himself, “What is true?” As he analyzed the situation, as he poured himself over the ramifications and implications, he asked himself, “What do I know for sure about God in this situation?” He must have thought, well he knew that God had given him Isaac; he wasn’t a natural son. He was a miracle boy. No other explanation for having a son at that age, right? He also knew that Isaac was the son of promise; there wasn’t going to be another son of promise. He was it. He knew that. He knew that God was merciful and that He had guided him all of his life. He had chosen him to leave Ur; He had promised him many wonderful things. He had protected them in Egypt; He had dealt bountifully with him. So, he knew that God was merciful.

He knew God was trustworthy. God had promised him a son and while He had waited 25 years to do it, He kept His promise. He wasn’t fickle; He wasn’t going to change His mind. When God says something, it’s good. He knew that God was all-powerful; He could do whatever He wanted to. If He could bring a dead womb to life, He could do anything. And so, he reasoned that God could even bring the dead back to life, that even though he would slay his son, even if he burned his body as a sacrifice, that God would raise him from the dead, because he was the son of promise. That’s faith. As incredible as it seems, he believed that if he killed his own son,

God had to raise Isaac from the dead because He had promised that his progeny would be through the line of Isaac.

Look at verse 19: “He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.” That was the only way. That was the only way he could understand God’s command. That’s faith. He believed the promise of God. God doesn’t lie. He doesn’t weasel out of His promises, there’s no bait and switch, there’s no exaggeration or minimalization. He doesn’t spin. God speaks and it is true.

My friends, when your faith is tested, think! Reason! Consider! And it’s the hardest thing to do when you’re in the midst of trial. When your emotions are going crazy. Think? Force yourself to think! I love the quote of Mike Tyson: “Everybody has a plan until they’re punched the mouth.” The great theologian, right? Everyone has a plan, but when the emotions come forth the last thing we want to do is to think. We tend to forget everything we know about God; we are tempted to think that He has forgotten us and He doesn’t love us anymore. “I knew it, I knew you didn’t love me.” Isn’t that what we’re tempted to do though? And it is precisely at this point that you have to think.

In Lamentations 3 we find Jeremiah the prophet, God had chosen for the Babylonian army to carry his beloved Judah away as exiles, and he feels that God has forgotten him and the nation of Israel. Listen, verse 15, he’s in misery: “He has filled me with bitterness; he has sated me with wormwood. He has made my teeth grind on gravel,” Picture that. “And made me cower in ashes; my soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is; so I say, “My endurance has perished; so has my hope from the LORD.”” Do you hear and feel the anguish that Jeremiah was feeling? But then, Jeremiah turned away from the circumstances around him and he asked

himself, “What do I know that is true about God?” Listen in verse 21: “But this I call to mind,” that sounds like he’s thinking, doesn’t it? He’s thinking; he’s considering. “This I call to mind, and therefore, I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. “The LORD is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.” The LORD is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD .” DO you see him? He’s facing this horrible situation, but he thinks and then he speaks what is true about God. It is in the trials that we must force ourselves to consider, just like Abraham did, just like Jeremiah did: to think and to reason, to bear everything we know, to bring everything that we know about God, about ourselves, about our situation, and think.

So, let’s practice that this morning, just for a few short minutes. Think about a situation in your life where you’re struggling. It may be our corporate situation, it may be an individual situation, a personal situation, but bring to mind this trial: a circumstance, a relationship that is sour, a situation that seems to have no hope, okay? So, let’s think through it together. What do I know to be true? Let your theology come to your aid. What do I know to be true? I’m going to suggest three things. Think through your personal situation with me.

The first one: God is sovereign over His creation. He is absolutely sovereign. So, what does that mean to you in your situation? What are the implications? It means that God is completely in control, totally and comprehensively, that He has ordained whatever situation that you are facing; He has allowed it to happen. You don’t have to understand why, but you know that He allowed it to happen or it wouldn’t have happened. That’s what it means to be sovereign. Knowing that God is sovereign, we know that also, if you’re a child of God, that it’s for your

good. He is shaping you into the image of Christ, the greatest good that we could ever hope for. Listen to Romans 8, very familiar, but listen in light of your situation, right now. “We know that for those who love God,” that’s us, right? “All things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose.” And oftentimes we stop right there, but what comes next? “For those,” I can’t read my writing. That’s so much fun. “For those he foreknew he also predestined,” what? “he predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son.” No matter what cruddy thing that you are facing, God is using it to conform you to the image of His Son. Praise Him! Praise Him for that! Without that, all is lost. I have no hope. He is using it; He is wringing every bit of it for your good. It is for His glory and His reputation, somehow, someway, He is going to receive more glory from this situation than if it hadn’t happened. Why? Because His reputation is on the line. He will keep His promises. He is sovereign. What does it mean to be sovereign? It means that nothing can stop Him from doing what He wants to do. Nothing! Nothing.

Do you remember the story of Job? And we tend to think Satan caused all of these problems for him, and in a way it’s true, but Satan was on a leash. God said, “You can do this, but no more.” Who was in charge? God was! He is weaving every situation of your life, every circumstance, every player remotely involved, and He is weaving it together into something beautiful. I don’t have to understand it, I just have to accept it. I know it’s true, because God says it is true. Therefore, it’s true. He is sovereign in your situation.

But secondly, He is wise. His wisdom is infinite. He knows what is good and He is working it out perfectly in your life. He is weaving together every situation, every circumstance, every player. And He is never early, and He is never late. The kids and I talked about waiting. I don’t like to wait. So, what does God do? He says, “Steve, you need to wait. Hold on. Wait.

Believe me.” “But God-” “No. Wait Steve.” Do you ever feel that way? I want it now. He’s never early, but He is never late. He is wise.

Thirdly, He loves you. He loves you. In all its mind-blowing, stupefying, inconceivable splendor, the truth is that God loves you more than what you can know. You know, the sovereignty of God holds little satisfaction or comfort to me if God doesn’t love me. That He rules the creation means so little if I don’t know that He’s ruling creation and He loves me. God loves you. There is no situation in your life that He doesn’t bring to you for your good and because He loves you. Of all the people that have ever lived, and that are living right now, He knows me by name. He knows the very hairs on my head, for some that’s more of a challenge than others, I grant you. But He knows me, and He knows you. He cares about you, and He loves you, and He’s at work in your situation bringing good to you, sculpting you into Jesus’ image.

Consider your situation. What is it that God is doing? You may not know, but you do know that He’s absolutely sovereign, He’s infinitely wise, and that He loves you, and my friends, sometimes that has to be enough. It is enough. And somehow, some way, He can bring joy and happiness in the midst of that. Figure that one out! Accept that as Tyler read, “My yolk is easy, and My burden is light,” and it is proportionate to how much you trust Him. Obey and think. Obey and think. When faced with a trial that reaches beyond anything that you could ever comprehend or understand. Obey and think. Let’s pray.