

KIAMA ANGLICAN  
CHURCHES**Sermon Notes: Cameron Webber, Associate Pastor****Jesus: Embracing His Promise****Hebrews 11:1-40****Reading Hebrews 11:1-40****Pre-Amble**

Many sports have some sort of Hall of Fame – a place to honour the best of the best in footy or cricket or athletics. There are also halls of fame for musicians of particular genres - the rock and roll hall of fame, even the country music hall of fame. And borrowing that idea and with a play on words, the well-known Hebrews 11 that we have just heard read is often referred to as the Bible's Hall of Faith.

It follows hot on the heels of what we read last week in chapter 10 which concluded, (10:39) 'We do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved.' And as chapter 11 begins we are told that (11:1) faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

And as we heard, the writer goes on to give us example after example of what this faith looks like, of what it means to not shrink back but to persevere. He gives example after example of people of faith: some with just a sentence; some with more detail; some with just a name mentioned because he 'doesn't have time to tell about Gideon, Barak,' etc (11:32). Some are simply alluded to, or certain types of faithful people are referred to as a group – the victorious, the persecuted, the martyrs – and all are commended for their faith (11:39). Hebrews 11 is The Great Hall of Faith.

Today we are going to zero in on just one of these heroes of faith, the one the writer spends the most time on, and that's Abraham. And to help us do that, let's hear again from God's Word, from Genesis 22, where we get the details of what we have heard summarised in Hebrews 11:17-19.

**Reading Genesis 22:1-19****Introduction**

The 'Almost Sacrifice of Isaac' is frequently pictured in art at the moment the Angel of the LORD calls out, 'Abraham! Abraham!'

I remember the story from the children's Bible we had when I was little though I note it wasn't in the kid's Bible we had for our kids. Perhaps it was deemed unsuitable for the little ones. Despite the happy ending, it is a traumatic story. And then I discover there are kids' Bible story books and Sunday School material which deal with it.

It is a gripping account, even when we know what's going to happen. It's a traumatic and even troubling event, but as one commentator suggests, "No other story in Genesis, indeed in the whole OT, can match the sacrifice of Isaac for its haunting beauty or its theological depth." (*Gordon Wenham*)

It is the high point of the Abraham Narrative in Genesis, and it's the climax of the brief summary the writer to the Hebrews gives us as we see Abraham's faith and his obedience.

**Prayer****1. Abraham Embraced the Promises of God**

I love that description of Abraham in Hebrews 11:17. It describes him as, 'He who had embraced the promises.' Some translations have 'received' but the word there means more than 'received'. Not just 'get them', but 'accept them' and (as much as a recipient can) assume responsibility for them.

Embracing the promises of God was a step of faith for Abraham. And that faith - in the words of Hebrews 11:1 - meant that he was sure of what he hoped for. He had a confidence in, he had an assurance about what he could not see.

And that faith is not 'wishful thinking' but grounded in the object of his faith. Abraham and Sarah (11:11) 'considered him faithful who had made the promise.' They believed God would make them into a great nation and that though their offspring blessing would flow to all peoples on earth. (see Genesis 12:1-3) They took God at his word.

But to embrace the promises of God meant faith could not be mere mental ascent to what God had said, it had to lead to action, it needed to be accompanied by obedience, because the promise of blessing was accompanied by a command...

- Genesis 12:1 'Go from ... your people ... to the land I will show you...'
- Genesis 12:4 So Abram went, as the LORD had told him.
- Hebrews 11:8-9a By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.

To embrace the promise by faith is to obey the command.

'I do not have time to tell about' (11:32) Abraham's long journey of growing in faith, sometimes two steps forward, one step back, but with the writer to the Hebrews we skip forward some 40-50 years. We move from Heb 11:8 to 11:17. We move from Genesis 12 to Genesis 22 (as read).

Perhaps it was the promise of blessing that encouraged his obedience to the command in Genesis 12 to 'go to the land I will show you.' But in Genesis 22, there is no such carrot to encourage Abraham with this command when (Genesis 22:1-2) sometime later God tested Abraham. He said to him, 'Abraham! Take your son, your only son, whom you love - Isaac, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.'

How can this be? Isn't Isaac the one through whom the promised great nation would come? Isn't it through Isaac that blessing will come to all peoples? After all, God has already rejected all of Abraham's alternate suggestions about how that great nation should come about...

- through his servant, Eliezer of Damascus, (Genesis 15:2-3)
- using the surrogate mother approach - resulting in the birth of Ishmael.

And after 25 years of waiting from when the promise was first made...

- Genesis 21:1-5 Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age.
- Hebrews 11:11 By faith, even though Sarah was past childbearing age, gave birth to Isaac.

Sure there were some ups and downs and some wavering over the years but also growth - learning more about God and what it means to walk before him - growth in faith and obedience and embracing the promises because they (11:11) considered him faithful who had made the promise.

And no doubt the miracle that was Isaac had strengthened Abraham's faith. But now it is some 20-25 years later and that embracing of the promises, that faith and that obedience is about to be put to a test. (Genesis 22:2) 'Take your son, your only son, whom you love - Isaac, and go to the region of Moriah. ... Sacrifice him there...'

This test will do what all of God's testing does. It will show what Abraham is really like. (see Deuteronomy 8:2,16) God already knows the heart, but the test shows Abraham, and it shows us what he is like. Is Abraham really the man of faith and obedience that he seems to be? All Abraham's hopes are riding on Isaac, the son of promise. What will he do? Obedience to God and love for his son tear him in opposite directions.

This command of God is incomprehensible - morally - as we know from God's later commands (see Micah 6:7, Lev 18:21). Abraham is familiar with human sacrifice from Ur, but surely it abhorrent none-the-less. This command of God is incomprehensible - theologically - because all the promises depend on Isaac's survival.

So what does he do? (Genesis 22:3) Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. He cuts wood for the burnt offering, and sets out. 'Early the next morning' - Prompt obedience to the hardest command.

When Isaac asks (Genesis 22:7b), 'Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?' Abraham makes a bold statement (Genesis 22:8) 'God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.'

Is he trying to hide the awful truth from his son? Is this just wishful thinking? Or a statement of great faith?

Faith isn't about us somehow building up enough belief to make it happen, it isn't about having faith in 'my faith', rather Abraham can make this statement of faith, and can obey in faith, (Hebrews 11:11) because he considered Him faithful who had made the promise.

And so (Hebrews 11:17-19), 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. Because at the last minute as he is about to sacrifice his son (Genesis 22:11-12) The angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Do not lay a hand on the boy. Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."

Abraham sees the ram caught in the bushes (Genesis 22:13b-14a) and sacrifices it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. The Tester is the Provider! Abraham's faith and obedience were well placed and God reiterates the promise first made 50 years earlier. (Genesis 22:16b, 17a,18) 'Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you ... and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.'

No wonder then that the writer to the Hebrews devotes so much space to Abraham's example of embracing the promises of God, of accepting them by faith and obeying the command.

## **2. Jesus Fulfilled the Promises of God**

But there is that interesting section in Hebrews 11 in between the two sections about Abraham. (Hebrews 11:13) All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth.

Abraham did receive something that was promised - a son. But he was never more than a foreigner and stranger in the promised land. All Abraham ever owned of the promised land was a paddock and a burial cave. He never saw the great nation or blessing flowing to all peoples. Indeed - none of these OT people who were (Hebrews 11:39-40) commended for their faith received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us (NT people of faith) so that only together with us would they be made perfect.

Now if you've been here for just about any of this series on Hebrews that will not surprise you because we have seen time and again that Jesus is the Name above all Names (our series heading). Jesus is the one who fulfilled the promises of God.

We've seen again and again how the Old Testament, the Old Covenant, is a shadow but the reality is found in Christ. (Hebrews 10:1) And so the promise made to Abraham that (Genesis 22:18) 'through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed' is fulfilled by Jesus.

And though the writer doesn't expand on it, we sure do have a shadow in Genesis 22 that points to the reality and fulfilment in, though, and by Jesus, because Genesis 22 was not the last time a father's son was to be sacrificed on a mountain in the region of Moriah (Genesis 22:2). You know where the region of Moriah is? Jerusalem! (see 2 Chronicles 3:1)

This was not the last time a father's son carried on his back the wood to be used for that sacrifice. (Genesis 22:6) One Jewish commentary on Genesis (*midrash Genesis Rabbah*) that was written in the time of the Roman Empire, but before the time of Jesus comments that "Isaac with the wood on his back is like condemned man carrying his cross." Prophetic words. As we read in the gospels (John 19:17) Jesus, carrying his own cross, went out to the place of the Skull – Golgotha, on the hill of Calvary - a mountain in the region of Moriah.

And Genesis 22 was not the last time a son submitted himself in obedience to his father's will despite what was being asked. There was plenty of time for Isaac to realise what was going on, and to take off. He is not a little boy, as pictured in the kids' Bible story books, but a strapping young man in his early to mid 20s who could have easily overpowered his 'old man' yet he allows himself to be bound and placed on the altar. He consents to what is happening, he willingly submits to his father, and the command God has given, despite the awful cost.

And Jesus, who could have called for legion of angels, also willingly submits to his Father “not my will, but yours be done.” (Luke 22:42) He was obedient to death - even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:8)

Maybe Isaac’s submission came from his faith that “God himself will provide the lamb” (Genesis 22:8). But for Jesus, there will be no last minute reprieve no angel from heaven, no lamb caught in a thicket to act as a substitute, because he is the one of whom John the Baptist had said, “Behold, the Lamb of God!” (John 1:29, 36). Jesus is the lamb, and there is no substitute.

Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac not withholding his son, his only son (Genesis 22:12), but God actually sacrifices his only Son.

As Paul says (Romans 8:32) God did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us. Or as we sometimes sing...

- To God be the glory, great things he has done,  
so loved he the world that he gave us his Son, who yielded his life...
- How deep the Father’s love for us, ...  
that he should give his only Son ...

Abraham called that place ‘The Lord Will Provide’ (Genesis 22:14) but we know it speaks of an even greater provision, God himself has provided THE Lamb.

The almost sacrifice of Isaac foreshadowed what Jesus would do as the promised offspring of Abraham through whom all nations would be blessed - Jesus, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! (John 1:29b). Jesus, who takes the punishment we deserve for our sin - for our rejection of our Creator, because God in his great love deals with the problem of our sin, by taking the punishment we deserve and laying it on His Son - Jesus Christ – the lamb he has provided. He is our substitute.

### **3. We Embrace the Promises of God**

And so we are to be those who Embrace the Promises of God – in Jesus. Embrace the promise that (John 3:16) God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever has faith in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

If you haven’t made that response, I urge you to do so - find out more - talk to me or Steve or someone here who can help you look further at Jesus and what he has done in dying for you. Accept by faith what Jesus has done for you.

Most of us here have probably done that, but just as for Abraham to embrace the promises of God meant a faith which led to action and was accompanied by obedience - so too for us. No wonder that James uses this event to show that genuine faith must be expressed in obedience to God. (James 2:21-22) Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.

As with Abraham, so too with us. God wants our faith and our active obedience. It is integral to true discipleship, for all those who would follow God, for all who would place their faith in Jesus. As AW Tozer said, ‘The Bible recognizes no faith that does not lead to obedience, nor does it recognize any obedience that does not spring from faith. The two are opposite sides of the same coin.’

Genuine faith must go beyond the mere intellectual assent. Faith must radically affect our hearts so that we respond positively to God with the obedience of faith. We too are to follow the clear commands in God's word. There may be major crises which test our faith and obedience. There will definitely be 'minor' ones. It can be no other way when we live in a world where the expectations of life so often run counter to the way God calls us as his people to live, where obedience to God is seen as foolishness.

Will we chose to seek some sort of security in doing things like everyone else or will our day by day decisions about relationships, money, work, the way we spend our time, the things we watch on television and the internet, the way we speak to others and the way we speak about others... will these things show us to be those whose faith is in God, show us to be those who actually live in obedience to him, and to his Word? Or will the tests of day to day life show us up as those who care more about what those around us think, than what God thinks? Will they show us to have faith that God actually knows best, or will we hedge our bets and listen to the voice of the world which calls us not to obedience but to self-centred living. Will we walk by sight rather than faith? Is our knowledge of God reflected in our faith in God, expressed in our obedience to God?

We can only truly embrace the promises of God when take that bigger perspective, like Abraham, who (Hebrews 11:16) was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God, when we take that bigger perspective (Hebrews 11:16) longing for a better country - a heavenly one.

We have faith in Jesus our Saviour, and we call him Lord, but do we do what he says, do we obey him?

We are called to embrace the promise of God following Abraham's example of faith in God, expressed in obedience to God. And like Abraham when we get off track or fail the test, we are to hear the rebuke and the call of God and turn again in repentance knowing the forgiveness that comes through the sacrifice of Jesus and, empowered by the Holy Spirit, get back on track.

### **Conclusion**

In the 1800s, John Patten, a Scottish missionary went to the New Hebrides (Vanuatu) to tell the people there about Jesus.

He was trying to translate some of the Bible into their language but he couldn't get across the idea of trust, belief – of faith. There was no obvious word in their language.

One day he lent back on his chair with his feet off the ground and asked his translation helper what he was doing. His helper replied with a word that meant "to lean your whole weight upon" and so he used that word as the translation of faith.

Faith is leaning our whole weight upon Jesus, it is putting all our eggs in one basket, it's relying on him and him alone, embracing his promise, taking him at his word and obeying him and (Hebrews 11:16) longing for a better country - a heavenly one knowing God is not ashamed to be called our God, for he has prepared a city for us.

### **Prayer**