

HEBREWS VERSE BY VERSE - The New and Living Way - Part forty-six

Sunday, March 18th, 2018 - 10:00 a.m. - Teaching #2035

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WHEN FAITH SEEMS UNREASONABLY CHALLENGED

Hebrews 11:17-22 - "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, [18] of whom it was said, 'Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.' [19] He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. [20] By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. [21] By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. [22] By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones."

This is a very carefully crafted text. And there's a reason for that. Abraham is an extreme example of the kind of situation all will eventually face as they place trust in the good promises of God.

The important words are in **verses 17b and 18** - "**...and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, [18] of whom it was said, 'Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.'**"

Notice that description of Isaac as Abraham's "***only son***" (17). In other words, Ishmael and any other sons didn't count. God had been very specific with His promise to Abraham - **Genesis 21:12** - "But God said to Abraham, 'Be not displeased because of the boy and because of your slave woman. Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for **through Isaac shall your offspring be named.**'"

Isaac was ***unique and irreplaceable*** in the plan of God, and God had ***told*** as much to Abraham - **Genesis 22:2** - "He said, '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 on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.'"

Don't miss the deliberate ***tension*** in our Hebrews text. Our inspired writer very carefully and specifically identifies Abraham, "***...he who had received the promises....***" (17). And those promises included descendants like the stars in the heavens and the sands on the seashore ***through Isaac***. ***This*** is the Abraham being asked to offer up his son Isaac. He is specifically identified as the receiver of divine promise. That's what Abraham is famous for to this day. That's how we all ***identify*** him. He's the one with whom God made these covenant promises through Isaac.

Do you see what's happening here? First there is ***where God is taking Abraham in these disturbing circumstances***, and second, there is ***what God had promised Abraham through his son, Isaac***. And the two didn't line up at all. Abraham's ***circumstances*** made the ***promise*** of God look impossible. In fact, the two were flat out contradictory.

So this text brims with relevancy. What do you do when where God is leading you makes future blessing look impossible? Where does faith land when future hope seems lost? Minor trials and set-backs we expect. Life isn't always easy and we know it.

But this wasn't minor. This was devastating. This represented everything Abraham had come to know of God. He began his whole pilgrimage on the foundation of trusting God's promised future. O, how he must have rejoiced when, against all physical odds, he and old Sarah gave birth to Isaac just as the LORD had promised. God was good and faithful after all.

And now this. Everything Abraham had built his life on was being undone. That's the kind of issue we're dealing with in this great text. Where do you go when it seems there is no longer any place to go?

This is no light, breezy text. Look carefully at some of the lessons for those times when faith is stretched beyond understanding:

1) **FAITH CALCULATES AND COMPUTES ITS WAY BACK TO FOUNDATIONS WHEN CIRCUMSTANCES MAKE NO SENSE**

Hebrews 11:17-19 - "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, [18] of whom it was said, 'Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.' [19] ***He considered*** that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back."

It is interesting to see the way various translations describe the activity of Abraham's brain through this whole trial in **verse 19**. The **ESV** uses the verb "**considered**" - the **KJV** says "**accounting**" - the **NKJV** says "**concluding**" - and the **NIV** says Abraham "**reasoned**."

All of these terms describe the way Abraham **resisted any emotional, uncalculated response** to his circumstances. Just take that one description of Abraham "**accounting**" (KJV) for what was going on. We all know a bit of what accounting entails. It's a kind of **bookkeeping**. It's a process of **not missing anything - not glossing over anything without due attention**. It's a way of making sure everything is properly figured in.

There are times when we can't just waddle through following Jesus in our regular fashion. There are times when faith has to function less like a creed and more like a shield - **Ephesians 6:16** - "**....take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one....**"

While it's not recorded in the Biblical text, it's not hard to imagine some of the thoughts Satan insinuated into Abraham's situation. Remember Satan's insinuations into the situation of Eve in the garden and God's restriction of not eating the fruit of one tree:

Genesis 3:1-5 - "**Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'**" [2] And the woman said to the serpent, "**We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, [3] but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'**" [4] **But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not surely die. [5] For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.'**"

If Satan casts doubt on the authenticity of God's command not to eat fruit from one tree, imagine his engagement in this situation where God commands Abraham to sacrifice his own son. Surely this command couldn't be from God. Surely this command need not be taken seriously. Surely God is more loving and good than to command such a horrific deed. Theologians like **Brian Zahnd** and **Greg Boyd** say the very same thing. Abraham would be silly to take such a command seriously. Abraham must have been mistaken when he thought he heard God. And when Satan and your theologians imply the same idea you have good reason to be careful.

And it's right at this point that Abraham **does** what Eve **failed to do**. He starts his **accounting process**. He knows God called him from his land and kindred and his father's house. And he knows he obeyed that call. He knows Sarah gave birth to Isaac at nearly 100 years of age. He knows divine visitors came to him in the desert and predicted this birth a year before it happened. He vividly remembers being shown the sky that starry night and being told that **through Isaac** his descendants would be as uncountable in number.

Remember, he still hates what he's been commanded to do. He still loathes his present moral predicament. He still dearly loves his son of promise. And not one ounce of the confusion and darkness of his mind has been lifted. But he's **taking everything into account**.

Here's where he lands. God has not brought him this far for nothing. As he thinks it all through Abraham recognizes God had not revoked one word of His promised covenant to Abraham **and his descendants through Isaac**. This is the point from which Abraham proceeds through the anguish and the darkness.

2) **ABRAHAM PROCEEDS IN OBEDIENCE WITH A FAITH THAT LOOKS FARTHER DOWN THE ROAD THAN THE PRESENT DARKNESS**

Hebrews 11:19 - "**He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back."**

There is a difference between **solving** a dilemma and looking **behind** it. Faith has its limitations. Abraham is in a situation that can't be **solved**. He can't find a **reason** for what he knows God is calling him to do. This isn't something to be **figured out**. But he can look farther down the road. He can look to a moment when God could and would **raise Isaac from the dead**.

We'll never know for sure, but is this the thinking that prompted Abraham's words to his servants - **Genesis 22:5** - "Then Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.'"

If Abraham "**and the boy**" were going to return then the boy would have to be raised from the dead. And if these servants were to **see** Abraham and the boy return the resurrection would have to be a **physical** resurrection.

Of course, Abraham hasn't been **promised** any sort of resurrection for Isaac at all. But Abraham's faith is a **calculating** faith. It's a faith that has a definite future promised. And sometimes the **present** gets so muddled up the **future promise** is all you have left.

You may never learn a more important lesson on faith than this. If there is nothing in your **present circumstances** that makes sense - if there is nothing but **confusion** and **darkness** all around - you aren't looking far enough down the road. When you can't see the hand of God in your **present** trust in His promise for your **future**.

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 - "So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. [17] For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, [18] as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal."

There is a sure way to "**lose heart**" in this present world. It is never an easy thing to **not look at your body as it wastes away**. It is never an easy thing to **not look at prayers that aren't answered**. It is never an easy thing to **fight fear and fatigue** in a struggle that never seems to end.

Remember, the truth of the matter is **none of us has a lasting future in our present circumstances**. No one will keep comfort and security indefinitely. Faith has realistic expectations - "...the things that are seen are **transient**..." (18). There is nothing but loss ahead for any of us in the things seen.

Look farther down the road - "...**hope does not put us to shame**..." (Romans 5:5). You have nothing but an **un-disappointing future ahead in Christ Jesus**. There will be no sadness in it. There will be no confusion. Paul says the "**groaning of creation**" will end. Faith always has this **future** even when it doesn't have **answers**.

Our writer of Hebrews has his own way of emphasizing God's promised future by immediately moving from Abraham's account of apparently losing everything to describe the faith of **Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph**:

Hebrews 11:20-21 - "By faith **Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau**. [21] By faith **Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph**, bowing in worship over the head of his staff."

Of course, old Abraham can't see any of this as he trudges up the mountain with Isaac. But nothing of this future plan was ever out of God's mind or control. It never is. God's invisible future was always secure.

3) **GREAT SAINTS HAVE ALWAYS HAD THE SAME KIND OF FAITH AS ABRAHAM**

Hebrews 11:22 - "By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones."

The great thing about this one-verse summary of Joseph's faith is the way it indirectly assumes two things:

- a) **Joseph never fell in love with Egypt**. He never thought of it as home though he had wealth and power there as he had had nowhere else. None of the comforts of Egypt made him happy to call it home.

It is never easy to live like a refugee when you can have everything your heart desires. That's a **greater** trial of faith than the strange command to Abraham to offer Isaac. Joseph's faith was great because it **overruled** all the self-destructive desires of his fallen heart.

- b) **Joseph died never seeing Israel's deliverance from Egypt but that didn't stop him from planning for it**. There is

nothing more beautiful in today's text than this. We should all make note of it as we **await** our coming exodus.

Just like Abraham, Joseph's faith was constantly looking farther down the road than his present circumstances. There is a more real future coming. It's eternal. It matters more than anything else. Keep your heart set on the joy that is set before you.