

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

THE SUMMIT OF FAITH

Hebrews 11:17-19

By

Steven J. Cole

October 17, 2004

© Steven J. Cole, 2004

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture
Quotations are from the New American
Standard Bible, Updated Edition
© The Lockman Foundation

October 17, 2004
Hebrews Lesson 38

The Summit of Faith
Hebrews 11:17-19; Genesis 22:1-18

Marla and I enjoy climbing Colorado's 14er's, the peaks that tower at least 14,000 feet above sea level. The views from the top are breathtaking! You get a perspective on the land below that you cannot get when you're down there. I especially enjoy it when we are the only ones on the summit, just to sit and drink it in.

Today we are going to look up at the Mount Everest of faith. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac, is the highest point—the summit—of faith in all history, except for Jesus' going to the cross. I have never climbed anywhere near this high. I can only stand below and look up, aware of how my own faith falls far short. But from below, we can learn some important lessons, which will help us to go higher. His story teaches us that...

The summit of faith is, when God tests us, to surrender
to Him that which is most precious to us,
counting on Him to keep His promises.

The author's purpose in this chapter is to show these believers facing trials that faith overcomes all obstacles, even when circumstances seem contrary to God's promises. Faith obtains the blessing—if not in this life, in eternity—by looking to God, not to circumstances. But faith is like a muscle: it grows stronger by frequent use. Thus,

1. God will test our faith.

"By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac...." As Peter wrote (1 Pet. 1:6-7) to believers facing persecution, "In this [your salvation] you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ." Testing through fire sounds scary, but keep in mind:

A. God will test our faith, but never beyond what we can bear.

Paul promises (1 Cor. 10:13), "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it." *Tempted* comes from the same Greek verb translated *tested* in Heb. 11:17. James 1:13-14 explains, "Let no one say when he is tempted [same verb], 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust."

God *tests* us and every testing is potentially a *temptation* if we yield to our lusts. But temptation does not come from God but from our sinful lusts. If we sin under testing, we cannot blame God, because He provides the way of escape for us in every testing. He knows how much we can handle.

If we fail the test, rather than blaming God, we need to examine why we failed and learn from it. Proverbs 19:3 observes, "The foolishness of man ruins his way, and his heart rages against the Lord." Our own moral stupidity gets us in trouble, but then we're prone to blame God. But rather than rage against the Lord, we need to accept responsibility for our failures. God tests our faith, but never beyond what we can bear. Why does He test us?

- B. God's purpose in testing our faith is not to make it fail, but to reveal the quality of our faith and to help us to grow.

His purpose in the testing is to prove to us and to others the genuine quality of our faith. Without testing, we don't know if our faith is real. The test shows how strong the faith is. If we submit to God in the test by trusting Him, our faith will grow stronger.

When I was in college I took a course in First Aid. But in the 35 years since then, I've never once had to use what I learned in that course to save someone's life. If you had a heart attack right now and stopped breathing, would you rather that *I* gave you CPR, or an EMT, who has done it often? I *might* be able to do it, but my skill has never been tested. You'd have a far better chance of survival if someone who has tested his skill at CPR many times came to your aid.

It is encouraging to realize that this test of sacrificing Isaac was not the first one that God laid on Abraham, and to know that Abraham had failed some of the earlier tests. (Maybe there is hope even for me!) God was patient and faithful to keep working with Abraham, growing his faith through repeated tests.

When God first called Abram to leave his family and his native country, he only partially obeyed. He went as far as Haran, but his father went with him. Only after his father's death and a subsequent call of God, did Abram fully obey (Acts 7:2-4, compared with Gen. 11:31-12:4). When he finally got to Canaan, there was a famine. Without seeking God, Abram went down to Egypt, and there he failed by passing off Sarah as his sister (Gen. 12:10-20). Years later, when God delayed fulfilling the promise of a son, Abram failed by having relations with Hagar, resulting in the birth of Ishmael (Gen. 16). Later, he failed the test again by lying about Sarah as his sister (Gen. 20).

So it wasn't as if Abraham started out strong in faith and never faltered. He had his ups and downs, just as we do. It was through the many times that his faith was tested, with some victories, but also with some failures, that Abraham grew in faith. So if you are going through a time of severe trial, take to heart Peter's words to suffering saints (1 Pet. 4:12-13): "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation."

Abraham's response to this extreme test of faith instructs us about how we should respond when we are tested:

2. We should respond to the testing of our faith with prompt obedience and total surrender of that which is most precious to us.

That's easily said, but not so easily done! Note Abraham's response to this supreme test:

- A. Abraham obeyed God promptly without argument, even though God's command seemed to contradict His promise.

Abraham, being human, *must* have wrestled emotionally with this horrific command. During the three-day journey to the place that God had designated, Abraham must have been tempted with thoughts, such as, "Are you *sure* that it was *God* who spoke to you? Surely a good and loving God would not ask a father to slaughter his own son! It must have been *Satan* telling you to do this terrible deed! After all, if Isaac is the promised heir through whom Messiah will come, it would defeat God's purpose to kill Isaac!"

But the Bible does not describe any such struggle. Genesis simply records that God commanded him to offer his son whom he loved, and that he arose early the next morning and proceeded to obey. In Hebrews 11:17, the tense of *offered* indicates that in purpose and intent, he offered Isaac. He would have done so if God had not stopped him at the last possible moment (F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 308).

Let me emphasize that God has never given such a command, either before or after Abraham's time. This was unique in all of history. Also, Abraham did not have any portion of the Bible to guide him. I presume that God spoke to Abraham in an audible voice that he clearly recognized. Today, we have God's complete revelation in His Word. He *rarely*, if ever, speaks to us audibly. He *never* commands us to do anything contrary to His written Word. When a demented person says that a voice told him or her to kill someone, it is not God, but Satan, who is speaking! God's commandments do *not* contradict His Word.

So we must apply Abraham's example carefully, but we must apply it. The application is this: When God's Word commands us to do something difficult or distasteful, we must obey promptly, without disputing with God. It may be the command to stay in a difficult marriage, even though you would find great relief in leaving. It may be the command to love a difficult person, or to forgive someone who has greatly wronged you. There are many such difficult commands in the Bible. We will not grow in faith if we dodge them. We must submit to God with prompt obedience if we want to go higher in faith.

Also, there are some difficult truths in God's Word that require submission, not debate, if we want to grow in faith. The doctrine of God's sovereignty in choosing some, but not all, for salva-

tion causes many to stumble. They think that it contradicts God's will that none should perish and that it violates human freedom. Because they can't reconcile these things, they deny what Scripture plainly and repeatedly teaches, that God "has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires" (Rom. 9:18). I believe that such difficult truths are not understood primarily through logic or arguments, but through submission.

So, even though God's command to sacrifice Isaac seemed contradictory to God's promises and to His love, Abraham submitted himself in prompt obedience.

- B. Abraham surrendered to God that which was most precious to him.

It would have been easier for Abraham if God had said, "I'm going to take your life." And, while Abraham dearly loved Sarah, I'm sure that it would have been easier to let her go than to sacrifice Isaac. Our text uses three phrases to hammer home how difficult it was for Abraham to offer up Isaac.

First, it refers to Abraham as "he who had received the promises." God had repeatedly promised to make of Abraham a great nation. Abraham and Sarah had waited 25 years, from when he was 75 till he was 100, for God to give them Isaac, the son of the promise. After waiting so long, with no hope of any other fulfillment, God finally gave them this special son. But now, He tells Abraham to kill and incinerate this precious son!

Second, the text says that Abraham "was offering up his only begotten son." Abraham had fathered Ishmael, and he would have other sons through Keturah (Gen. 25:1-2, 5-6). So the term does not mean his *only* son, but rather, his *unique* son, the son of the promise. It is the same term that John uses of Jesus (John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9), who is God's unique Son in a way that no one else is or could be.

We all have hopes for our children, not only that they would be protected from danger and outlive us, but also that they might do well in life. But imagine how much greater were Abraham's hopes for Isaac, the unique son of God's promise, who had been miraculously conceived after all human hope was gone!

To further emphasize the difficulty, verse 18 recites the promise, "In Isaac your descendants shall be called." How confusing this must have been to Abraham! Before Isaac's birth, Abraham had asked God to let Ishmael be the son of the promise. God refused, saying, "No, but Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him" (Gen. 17:19). So now that Abraham has Isaac, and the boy has grown probably into his teens, God says, "Offer him as a burnt offering!" Nothing was more precious to Abraham than Isaac, and now God asks Abraham to kill him! With the exception of Jesus going to the cross, God has never given a more difficult command to anyone!

It's not easy to apply what I'm about to say, but we all need to work at it: *God should be more valuable to me than even the most precious gifts that He has given to me.* That's what Jesus meant when He said, "If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:26). In comparison with our love for Him, our love for those who are closest to us should seem like hatred.

It is so easy to shift your focus from the Giver to the gifts. You pray for a husband or wife, and after years of loneliness, God provides. There is the danger of loving that mate more than you love God! You're childless, and pray for a child. God answers and gives you a beautiful baby. What if the Lord, in His wisdom and providence, takes that child in death? I admit that losing a child is still my greatest fear, even though my children are all adults now. But we need to face the question: If God took one or all of my children, would I bitterly rage at God? Or would I submit and say with Job, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21)?

We can even love a ministry more than we love God. It's easy to get so caught up with advancing His kingdom that in all of our busyness, God takes a back seat to the work! I once heard the late Alan Redpath, an exemplary man of God, speak. He shared how God had struck him down with a stroke. It was at a time when the ministry was thriving and there were many opportunities. He lay in

the hospital and asked God, "Why?" The Lord impressed on him, "Alan, you've gotten the work ahead of your worship!"

God wants the absolute first place in our hearts, even if it means offering up Isaac! It is a severe test of our faith when He takes something precious from us. Will we, like Abraham, obey with total surrender, or do we find fault with God? But, how did Abraham do this? In two words, "by faith." Verse 19 explains how his faith reasoned:

3. Faith counts on God to keep His promises, even if it requires the humanly impossible.

Abraham "considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type." Abraham's faith in God was so great that he thought, "If God wants me to kill Isaac, then to keep His promise, God will have to raise him from the dead!" This is amazing, in that there had been no resurrections from the dead in world history!

The Greek word translated *considered* comes from a word whose root meaning is numerical calculation. It came to be used metaphorically without reference to numbers to mean, a reckoning of characteristics or reasons (G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* [Charles Scribner's Sons], p. 270). It means to take into account in light of the facts.

Abraham did not blindly take a leap of faith. Rather, he considered God's attributes and character. He is loving, just, and mighty. He never deceives us. He is faithful to keep His covenant promises. He had promised that in Isaac, Abraham's descendants would be numbered. Isaac did not yet have any children, and yet God now had asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Therefore, God must be planning to raise Isaac from the dead! What logic!

Abraham's thought process shows us how to work through any trial of faith that we encounter. Satan will invariably try to get us to doubt or deny some aspect of God's character or attributes. He got Eve to doubt God's goodness by implying that God was keeping back something good in forbidding her to eat the fruit. He sometimes tempts us in times of trial to doubt God's love. That is why Paul affirms that no trial can separate us from God's love in Christ (Rom. 8:35-39). Sometimes he tries to get us to doubt God's

sovereignty: "A good and loving God wouldn't permit the kind of trial that you're going through." But, if you fall into that trap, you are giving Satan more power than he has, because he can only go as far in afflicting us as God directly permits him to go (Job 1-2).

As we've seen, faith is bringing into present reality the things hoped for (God's promises). It proves things not seen (Heb. 11:1). Faith believes that God "is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him" (11:6). With Abraham, faith says, "Even though my current situation seems to go against God's love and goodness, based on His covenant promises to me, I trust that He will work it all together for good for me." Or, as Joseph said after all of the rotten things that his brothers had done to him, "you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20).

The last phrase of the verse, that he "received him back as a type," means, "So dramatic was the sequence of events that it was as though Isaac really had died and had been raised up to life again" (Philip Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans], p. 484). This points us to the real reason that God commanded Abraham to kill his own son: *It was a type of what God Himself would do with His Son on the cross.*

Instead of being *against* God's love, His difficult command to Abraham actually *demonstrates* God's love in an unforgettable way that every parent can identify with. I never really knew how much my own father loved me until I became a dad. Then it hit me: My dad loved me as much as I love my child! And, God loves me even more than that! As Paul wrote (Rom. 8:32), "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?"

Conclusion

The September, 1930 *Moody Monthly* described the progress of Arthur and Ethel Tylee's pioneering a work with the Nhambiquara Indians in Brazil. They had made some good progress in "overcoming prejudice, cultivating confidence, acquiring a smattering of their language, and giving the first demonstrations of Christian love."

However, the December, 1930 issue reported the tragic deaths of Arthur Tylee, Mildred Kratz (a nurse who had joined the work),

and the Tylees' baby at the hands of the very Indians they loved and served. While the Tylees had made some progress gaining their confidence, conflict developed between the Indians and government workers who were attempting to erect a telegraph line through the area. Evidently the tribe's animosity towards outsiders confused them and led them to attack the missionaries, who were easy targets as they opened their home to the Indians. Mrs. Tylee was seriously wounded, but survived. She wrote a letter on January 4, 1931, from the very place where she lost her husband, baby, and friend (in *Moody Monthly* [6/31]).

She began by thanking those who had faithfully prayed, assuring them that they were not at fault for the attack. Then she wrote, "We must believe that all happened according to the plan of an all-wise and loving Heavenly Father, even to the smallest detail. I do not say we must understand, but only believe." She went on to describe the details of the attack, which left her unconscious after witnessing her husband's murder.

Then she said, "As I came back from the darkness of unconsciousness to find myself not only without my own family but to find my entire household gone, it was to know a Father's care so tender, so gentle, that even the intense loneliness of the first day's separation were made sacred and hallowed. The 'Kindly Light' that never fails made even those days luminous with His presence. So I ask you to believe with me that no accident has happened but only the working out of our Father's will. To you who knew and loved Arthur I beg you not to mourn him as dead, but to rejoice with me that he has been called to higher service."

That is the summit of faith: When God tests us, to surrender to Him that which is most precious to us, counting that He will keep His promises. May we all climb higher in faith!

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it important to distinguish between testing and temptation? Why is it sin to rage against God in our trials?
2. How can we know if God is telling us to do something, or whether it is coming from some other source?
3. Does faith mean putting our brains in neutral? How can we know when to stop trying to understand and just to trust?
4. How can we overcome the fear that God may take that which is most precious from us? How do we process this mentally?

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 2004, All Rights Reserved.