

Abraham's Faith in Three Fragrances

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[0 : 00] Well, let's read together, first of all, from Genesis chapter 22. Genesis chapter 22. That's our first reading.

Then we're going to go to Hebrews chapter 11. But first of all, Genesis 22, we're going to read from the beginning to verse 14. The well-known story of Abraham and Isaac.

After these things, God tested Abraham and said to him, Abraham, and he said, Here I am. 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.

So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and his son Isaac, and he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him.

On the third day, Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. 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.

[1 : 13] And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac, his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they both went on. Both of them went on together.

And Isaac said to his father, Abraham, My father. And he said, Here I am, my son. He said, Behold the fire and the wood. Abraham said, God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.

So they went both of them together. When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac, his son, and laid him on the altar on top of the wood.

Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, Abraham, Abraham.

And he said, Here I am. He said, Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, seeing that you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.

[2 : 25] And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked. And behold, behind him was a ram caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.

So Abraham called the name of that place, The Lord Will Provide. As it is said to this day, On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided. And then moving to the New Testament, to Hebrews chapter 11 and verse 8.

Where we read the following. By faith, Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out not knowing where he was going.

By faith, he went to live in a land of promise as in a foreign land. Living in tents with Isaac and Jacob. Heirs with him of the same promise.

For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. By faith, Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.

[3 : 41] Therefore, from one man and him as good as dead were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven, and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.

And then jumping down to verse 17, we read the following. Amen.

Amen. This is God's word. Let's join together in prayer. Our Father, we pray that as we come now to think about your word, to reflect on these chapters, this story we've been reading about, and how the chapter in Hebrews reflects over it.

We ask that you will edify each one of us, and give us, we pray, an inquiring mind to know what you are telling us, and how you're opening up your word to us.

We pray that you will impact us for good. Take away our sin, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen. I don't know how many of you have ever gone through an airport going through departures.

[5 : 11] I don't know what it is about airports that there's always a large section of perfumes. I've never figured out what's the connection between perfumes and airports, but that's another discussion.

In any case, pretty much every airport in the world has a perfume shop that you have to go through, and you actually have to go through it in order to get to the departure.

It's almost as if they're trying to kind of allure you somehow to buy perfumes, as well as other things as well. I've always found this quite fascinating, and I've always figured out if I was going to buy perfume, how do you choose the right one?

You can't just choose it by looking at the bottle. That's not really going to tell you a great deal, apart from the manufacturer or whatever. However, you have to smell it, don't you? You have to sample it, and then even after you sample about half a dozen of them, and I haven't done this, by the way, but if you have sampled half a dozen of them, you still don't remember what the first one is like. Once you've sampled the sixth one, you have to go back again, and then you have to compare it. You can see I'm not very good at this. But nonetheless, it's a really complicated exercise buying perfume.

[6 : 29] It's almost like you have to have one of these sample packs, and they do sell these, you know, where you get 12 little bottles of different kinds of fragrance, so that you don't have to choose one.

You get all of the 12, and then you've got the best of all worlds. All right? So, anyway, Hebrews 11 is like that sample pack. When I read through Hebrews 11, it's all about men and women who lived in the Old Testament, and they were men and women of faith.

There was one thing that kept them all together, that bound them all together, even though they lived thousands of years apart, and that is they all lived by faith.

That's what was in common with each one of them. And yet, they were all slightly different, like we saw this morning. None of them were perfect. They all failed at some point, even Abraham and Isaac and Moses.

They were all outstanding men of God, and yet they failed at some point in their lives. And yet, this is what they're remembered for. They're remembered for the faith that they exercised, or the fragrance of their faith.

[7 : 44] The fragrance of their faith. And sometimes, you get different fragrances, even from one person. I want to think this evening of three different fragrances in Abraham's faith.

Okay? I want us to think of Abraham's faith. I want us to choose the three things that Hebrews 11 tells us about Abraham's faith. Each of these three things is slightly different, and yet it's all bound together in this great word that runs all the way through the Bible, and the only way that we can truly know God properly, and that is through faith.

Faith is the key word in a relationship with God. You can't know God unless you have faith, unless there is that faith given to us by God, which rests on his reality and his power, and takes hold of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, here are three things that Abraham's faith meant. First of all, it meant that he was able to see the invisible.

It meant that he was able to see the invisible. Now, there's a paradox in all of these three things, and you'll see it right away. First, the first paradox is that he was able somehow to see the invisible.

[9 : 15] Now, I want us to go back to the very beginning of chapter 11 in Hebrews. Let me just read the first chapter, because it's not—when we're talking about faith seeing the invisible, we're not just talking about Abraham, we're talking about the whole galaxy of people in this chapter who live by faith.

And here's the definition of what faith is. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, and the conviction of things not seen.

And in all of these men and women in Hebrews chapter 11, they were somehow able to see—and I don't mean with their eyes, I mean with their souls, with their hearts—they were able to see that God was going to do something spectacular, even although they didn't know the detail of what was

going to happen.

What was it that Abraham believed in? You remember Abraham was a man who lived in Ur of the Chaldees. If you want to go all the way back to Genesis chapter 12, you find the beginning of God's dealing with him.

He lived far, far away in the land of Ur of the Chaldees. And God spoke to him, and he said, I want you to go and live in a totally different country, a country that you've never seen before, amongst a people among whom you have never lived before, and I want you to leave behind everything that's familiar to you in your own land.

[10 : 52] And that's what he did. He took God at his word, somehow or other, he laid hold, he rested in what God said to him as command, and he upsticks, and he went.

Hundreds of miles away, never to go back again to Ur of the Chaldees. He was to make his home on what the place that God called the promised land.

And God also gave him several promises. He said that his children would be like the sand of the seashore.

Innumerable. You wouldn't be able to count them. Now, Abraham was already an old man. His wife was beyond the age of childbirth. And so this promise was spectacular.

It was something miraculous. And yet he believed it. We'll look at that in the second point. Now, not only did God promise him that, he said that God would be the God of his children after him.

[11 : 57] All of these many children would be born to him and his descendants. Thirdly, he was going to give them the land that he was promising them. And fourthly, now here's the thing.

Here's the greatest promise of all. That in your seed, God said, in your descendants, all nations of the earth will be blessed.

In other words, God is doing something universal. He's doing something worldwide. And so Abraham's obedience in leaving his home country or his hometown meant that God was going to accomplish something truly, truly spectacular.

Not just for him, but for the whole world. Now, little did Abraham know what God exactly was going to do.

We know it, or we know some of it, because we have the benefit of 4,000 years of hindsight. We're able to look back and to read the history of the Old Testament as to how God's promise came to pass.

[13 : 12] He did have a son, and the son went on to have sons, and they had sons, and they had children, and grandchildren, great-grandchildren. And the children of Israel, as they became known, grew and grew and developed into thousands, millions, tens of millions of people.

And eventually, you remember, of course, how from that tribe, from that family, came the Lord Jesus Christ, who came into the world, gave his life on the cross, rose again on the third day, ascended up to heaven.

And as a result of his life on the cross, and as a result of his life and death and resurrection, the Christian faith was born. And it has extended all over the world in 2022.

I wonder if there, I'm not sure what the statistics are, but I know that most of the world has been reached with the gospel. It's truly remarkable what has happened.

And it all started the day that God chose Abraham and told him to go and leave his country and go into the promised land. Somehow, Abraham was able to see that God was doing something spectacular.

[14 : 31] And that encouraged him to give himself completely into the hand and into the purpose of God.

All because God had told him so. So for Abraham, God's promise was as real as if he had seen it. As if he already had it in his hand, even although he didn't know exactly what God was going to do. Now this meant, of course, a complete change of life for Abraham.

That's what faith means, of course. It means a complete change of life. And it means that in the New Testament. It means that in 2022, as much as it meant in whenever Abraham lived way back in the Old Testament.

That's why we can identify the one thing that links us where we are tonight with where Abraham was is faith. We too, if you belong to the Lord Jesus Christ, if you've trusted in him, then we too are men and women of faith.

[15 : 44] And we too can identify with what Abraham did. We've heard the command of God to come and trust in Jesus. And that has meant a complete different life, a new life.

What in John 3.16, that life is described as being born again. We're born again. We're different creatures to what we once were.

That's why Paul says, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature, a new creation. That's what the life of faith means.

It means giving ourselves, surrendering our all into the hand of God. I wonder if you've done that this evening.

I don't know all of you. I don't know if I'm speaking to someone and that's yet to happen in your life. You have yet to surrender, to take that step of commitment to Jesus.

[16 : 43] You may have heard him talking to you through his word. You may have experienced the power of his word. You may have heard him inviting you to forgiveness and eternal life in Jesus.

And yet you have not taken that step in which you say, I believe. Why not now? Why not this very moment?

Why not this very evening? To make this the opportunity, the time, the place where that commitment is made. Just like Abraham heard the voice of God and he went.

Just because it was God that told him. And that's the reason why I'm asking you to really think about this. It is because God is inviting us and commanding us to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. So he saw the invisible. But Abraham's faith also meant that he believed the impossible. He believed the impossible.

[17 : 57] Now, I'm not so much going to talk about Abraham now as I'm going to talk about his wife. Verse 11. And isn't it strange how him and his wife are spoken almost in the same terms?

I think that's really lovely. That, you know, God saw them as a unit, as a team. They were husband and wife. And so when he talks about the life of Abraham, he kind of weaves Sarah's faith into Abraham's faith.

They were one and the same thing. So he says in verse 11. Now, you remember the story, of course, the angels who went to Abraham's tent and they said they had a message from God for Abraham.

And Sarah was listening. She was eavesdropping the conversation. And they said, this time next year, Sarah will have a son. Remember what her reaction was? Her reaction was laughter. She laughed. No wonder. I'm not surprised. In one way, I'm not surprised because it was impossible. She was way beyond the age of childbearing.

[19 : 09] You see, she had come to expect God only to do what was scientifically possible, we would say. Only what was the norm.

She had, I guess, lost sight of the marvel of the power of God.

And I want you to notice what happens in verse 11. There's something really, really spectacular happening here. Because there was a transformation at some point in Sarah, right?

She says, by faith, Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age since she considered him faithful who had promised.

Now, remember what I said before? The first she heard of it, she laughed. Right? It was an impossibility. She was way beyond the age of childbearing. She laughed. But then, she must have gone away, and she must have thought again.

[20 : 18] And she must have said to herself something like, What if this is God? And what if his promise is true?

Well, it can't be anything else. If this is God, he must be... And God is able to change things. He's able to do things that I'm not able to do. He's able to override all of the scientific norms.

He's able to do it. And she came to be convinced by faith that this was the promise of God.

And she came to take hold of it and rest in it and believe in it. And she did become pregnant. And she did have a son.

Faith is where we believe the impossible. What is normally impossible.

[21 : 20] What is beyond what we would normally believe. You know, I reckon, and I'm sure you know what I'm talking about, when we struggle with certain things in the Bible.

If I was to ask you, what do you struggle intellectually with in the Bible? I'm sure that if we're honest, that there are times when we struggle with questions that arise out of it.

I'll tell you what I struggle with, right? I'll tell you. I'll be honest with you. I've struggled. I can go back over many, many years. When I think of the incarnation, all right? The incarnation. What do we mean by that?

It's when God, the second person of the Godhead, the Son of God, actually condescends and becomes a fetus in the womb of the Virgin Mary.

And he develops and grows and he is born in a manger and he's in the arms of his mother Mary.

[22 : 23] Now, I don't know about you, but I don't know. Everyone struggles. I mean, I think, did that really happen?

Did that really happen? That God himself actually became a helpless baby crying, needing his nappies changed, needing to be taught how to walk, needing to be fed.

That blows my mind. It stretches my understanding. But let's say it's true.

If it is true, then it is the most spectacular message and the most spectacular truth that has ever taken place.

And that's the thought process that Sarah went through. At first, it really stretched her understanding and stretched her faith. In fact, she just didn't believe it.

[23 : 27] She laughed. But then she went away and thought, well, this is God. And God can do anything. Nothing is impossible with him.

And if he has promised this, he is able to fulfill that promise. It's the same way as when truths of the Bible stretch our faith.

Remember who it is that we're dealing with. God who can do anything at all. Nothing is impossible with God. So whether it's the incarnation or whether it's Jesus walking on the water, you see, everything falls into place when we remember that it's God we're dealing with.

If this Jesus, if this man, Jesus of Nazareth, actually is God, then of course he can walk on the water. Of course he can feed 5,000 people. Of course he can raise the dead.

Of course he can touch the blind man and make him see. Because he is God. And that's why I can believe it this evening.

[24 : 31] Because it's God that is promising. And so Sarah, who started off being overwhelmed with the impossibility of what God had promised, she became persuaded herself that this promise would come to pass because it was God who had spoken.

And that's the root of our faith this evening, isn't it? We have heard the word of God and we have believed it. We have believed the impossible.

It's impossible. It's impossible for the dead to rise. It's utterly scientifically impossible. And it doesn't matter whether the person's been dead for two minutes or whether he's been dead for two days or four days or a year.

But Jesus was dead for three days and three nights and he rose from the dead. The tomb was empty. God had done the impossible. And so when we come to think of the resurrection that is still to come when Jesus comes again, then we can go back to that day outside of Jerusalem when God did the impossible and believe with 100% certainty that he will do it again because he specializes in the impossible.

Thirdly, Abraham's faith meant that he did the unthinkable. And of course, you know what I mean by that. When God spoke to him and when he said to take your only son, this is after Isaac is born, of course, and after he's grown up a bit, we don't know exactly what age he was.

[26 : 17] He was a young man. And God said to him one day, go and take your son. Yes, the son that you love and offer him up as a burnt offering to me in the place that I specify to you.

And Abraham, he obeyed. It even tells us what was going through his mind as he obeyed. Verse 19 says that he considered that God was able to raise him from the dead.

Once again, just like with Sarah, he's stepping back and he's thinking, he's logically working out that this is God who is making the promise. And somehow or other, he's going to keep that promise that my descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky, even although at the same time, he is telling me to do the unthinkable.

He's telling me to offer up my only son. Now, I don't know about you, but when I read this story in Genesis chapter 22, the biggest question, there are so many questions in Genesis 22, isn't there? But the biggest question that has ever challenged me is this. Why was it that God told Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac?

[27 : 34] God doesn't do things at random. You see, people will say, well, it was to test Abraham's faith. Well, I'm sure there was an element of that involved.

But that doesn't really convince me very much as to the reason why specific... There's hundreds of ways he could have tested Abraham's faith without telling him to do the unthinkable.

And the only conclusion I can come to, as I read Genesis 22, in the light of the rest of the Bible, and particularly in the light of the New Testament, the life and the death of Jesus, that somehow God is telling the world something through this story.

And that he is using Abraham. Abraham is acting out what God is going to do one day in himself and in his own son.

I can't help thinking, as he takes every step in obedience, that this is the gospel in miniature. It's a foreshadow of what would happen one day when the Father would take the beloved Son, in whom he was well pleased, and bring him to the place of death.

[29 : 10] And there he would be offered up as the sacrifice, except that this time there would be no voice telling him to stop.

There would be no intervention. There would be no last-minute command to do something else.

This time the Son would be given up.

He would give his own life up on the cross. He would lay down his life as the sacrifice for our sin.

And there would be no substitute because he was the substitute.

He was our substitute. When Jesus died on the cross, he died instead of us. He took our place. It was as if he said to the Father, I will go instead of all of these people who have sinned against you and are guilty and they deserve your wrath and your judgment and your condemnation, and I will take that condemnation instead of them.

And he did it. And he didn't stop. He didn't hold back. He took every step, one after the other, until it was finished.

[30 : 34] The story of Abraham and Isaac is such a striking resemblance to the gospel that I can't help believing that this was God telling his people at that time, thousands of years before Jesus ever came into the world, showing them something of what he would ultimately one day do.

And Abraham's faith brought him to see prophetically what God would do in Christ in the future. And it's only by faith that we get to see what God was going to do and we get to see what God has done in Christ on the cross.

Jesus himself says, Abraham saw my day and rejoiced. He saw that because he heard the voice of God.

He believed the voice of God. Somehow faith was awakened in him. Let me ask you this evening again, if you're not a Christian this evening, let me ask you, has faith been awakened in you?

If not, can I ask you to do something? To pray that God will waken faith in you.

[32 : 00] That God will arouse faith in you for the first time so that you will hear the voice of God and so that you will believe and trust in Jesus Christ whom he has sent.

And this is such an amazing example of what it means to live in obedience, to live in a life of 100% commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Abraham is such an amazing example of all that it cost. But it didn't matter for Abraham what it cost. Whatever it cost, all that mattered for Abraham was that God was his God.

And that's why he is known in the Bible as the friend of God. What a wonderful privilege this evening to be able to say, God is my friend.

He is my father. I have listened to him and I have trusted in him and everything he has promised will come to pass.

[33 : 07] Do you ever feel that you're on the margins in today's world as a Christian? I think we are. We're in a minority in today's world.

The forces of society are not sympathetic to what we believe. They are hostile indeed in many cases to what we believe for many reasons.

We're not the first ones to live as a minority. Abraham had to live that way. And he nonetheless trusted in the God who had made the promises to him, believing that one day, even if he would never see them come to pass, that one day they would come to pass.

That's where we are this evening. A faith that looks forward into the future and a faith that lives in obedience to what God has said.

Let's pray together. Our Father in heaven, we ask that tonight that we will be encouraged by the life of Abraham. That Abraham will be a role model for us, even although you will never ask us to do what Abraham was asked to do.

[34 : 23] It was unthinkable, and yet it was such a vivid illustration of how you would send your own son to the cross. We ask that you will make us obedient, make us men and women and boys and girls of faith that live and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and that say that I know that my Redeemer lives.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Well, we're going to sing in...