

## ABRAHAM WAS TESTED



Hebrews 11:17-22  
37th Message  
Bernard Bell  
March 1, 2026

SERIES: CHRIST BEFORE US

Will it be on the test? What educator has not been asked this question? A year ago I took the US citizenship test. I knew generally what would be on the test, for the list of one hundred questions was accessible. The first time I read through the list, there were only three for which I did not know the answer. I scored so well simply from having lived here 40 years and paying attention to news and public affairs. When I had my citizenship interview I was confident that I could correctly answer the requisite six out of ten questions randomly chosen by the officer. I thought it a fair test. All hundred items are indeed useful for citizens to know. But I did wonder how many native-born US citizens would actually be able to pass the test.

Like many in Britain I failed my first driving test. I was 18, had little opportunity to drive, and would have no opportunity over the next four years. Nearing the end of grad school in London I took 20 driving lessons at 8:30 on weekday mornings, i.e. towards the end of rush hour. On the last lesson the instructor had me drive around Trafalgar Square in the heart of London! After that, the test late morning in a quiet suburb was a piece of cake. Six weeks later I was very thankful that I had been tested so hard by my instructor, because I was driving at night on LA freeways in the rain. This was something I did not anticipate when I took the test. I could never have done that had my instructor not put me to the test.

Tests. Most people don't like them. But tests can do us good as did that final driving lesson. Sometimes we know what will be on the test. But often in life we don't. We can be tested in ways we don't foresee. This was surely true for Abraham.

Today we complete the section about Abraham in the Hall of Faith, Hebrews 11. Our text, 11:17-22, consists of four sentences, each beginning with the familiar phrase *By faith* that occurs 18 times in this chapter. The subjects of the four sentences are Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Four generations of Abraham and sons. Three generations of fulfilling the promise of a son that would develop into a great people. But in the first sentence this promise is in doubt.

### I. Abraham (11:17-19)

<sup>17</sup>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, <sup>18</sup>even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." <sup>19</sup>Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death. (Heb 11:17-19 NIV)

Abraham was a man of faith, but that faith needed developing. He was tested by God. God took him on a journey, a spiritual odyssey, to develop that faith. It began with God's call of Abraham:

**"Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you." (Gen 12:1)**

Leave everything behind and journey into the unknown, trusting that it is known to God. "So Abram went, as the LORD had told him"

(Gen 12:4). He took God at his word, and he obeyed God. This was faith. He considered God to be trustworthy. The account of Abraham in the Hall of Faith begins with this call:

**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. (Heb 11:8)**

Abraham never took possession of the land that was promised, except for a cave he purchased for Sarah's burial. He did eventually receive the promised son, though it took many years.

The climax of Abraham's spiritual odyssey came when God gave a second, similar command:

**"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 a mountain I will show you." (Gen 22:2)**

There are clear parallels between these two commands at the beginning and the end. The particular form of the command "Go" occurs in only these two passages. Again, Abraham has to venture out into the unknown: formerly it was "to the land I will show you." Now it is "on a mountain I will show you." He is utterly dependent on the trustworthiness of God.

This story looms large in all three Abrahamic faiths. Christians refer to it as the Sacrifice of Isaac. Jews refer to it as the *Akedah*, the Binding of Isaac. Muslims believe it was Ishmael not Isaac who was offered. It has a prominent place in all three faiths.

This call to sacrifice Isaac has horrified many people. How could God possibly demand child sacrifice? Many wonder why Abraham did not push back. Why didn't he argue with God?

What was God asking Abraham to do? In the OT there are many types of sacrifice. God tells Abraham to offer up Isaac as an *olah*. This is usually translated as a *burnt offering* because it is fully burnt on the altar. The Latin translation is *holocaust*, meaning *completely burnt*, though it has a more ominous meaning today. But the focus of the Hebrew word and of the verb used with it is that it all goes up, it ascends. So, "offer him up as an offering-up" (Schocken Bible). Offer up the *ascension* offering. Where does it go? It ascends into God's presence where it is received as a fragrant aroma. After the Flood Noah offered up an ascension offering, and it was received by the Lord as a soothing savor (Gen 8:20). God is asking Abraham to transfer Isaac back into his presence. Isaac was a gift from God; now God is asking for the gift back.

We heard a dramatized reading of the Genesis account. It is full of tension. Abraham was obedient all the way. What was he thinking? We would have so many questions. But the narrative draws a veil across his thoughts. It focuses on his obedience. So does Hebrews. "Abraham, when called to go...obeyed and went" (11:8). "Abraham, when tested, offered up Isaac" (11:17). Both responses of obedience, at the beginning and the end, were *by faith*. Faith and action were in sync. Faith resulted in faithfulness.

Hebrews first states this matter-of-factly: Abraham offered Isaac.

Then it restates this in a more dramatic manner: the one who had received the promises was offering up his one and only son. His one and only. Abraham had another son, Ishmael. But Isaac was the beloved one and only, granted as fulfillment of the promise. God had just assured him, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned” (Heb 11:14; Gen 21:12). Not through Ishmael.

In our call to worship we read, “The LORD is trustworthy in all he promises, and faithful in all he does” (Ps 145:17). How can he be trustworthy if he is asking for his promise back? We sang, “He won’t fail me now.” Was God going to fail Abraham now?

Abraham reckoned that somehow, even from the dead, God was able to raise, to bring back to life. He believed that somehow God would resolve the situation. He had confidence that somehow he and Isaac would return to his servants. He had confidence that somehow God himself would provide the lamb for the ascension offering.

Both Genesis and Hebrews describe this as a test. Both Hebrew and Greek use the same word for *testing* and *temptation*. To us these seem very different ideas, even opposite. They are indeed opposite but they are closely related. God was *testing* Abraham. Would he be obedient to God’s word and do what he said? Would he be faithful? But there would have been an evil force *tempting* Abraham to doubt God’s word, to doubt God’s faithfulness and character. Should a seed of doubt take root and flourish, Abraham would then disbelieve God’s word, his goodness, his kind intentions. Doubt would see God as the enemy. This would fruit into disobedience. The object of the test and of the temptation was the same: would Abraham offer up Isaac? God wanted Abraham to pass the test. The forces of evil and chaos, behind whom is the Adversary, wanted him to fail.

Doubt, unbelief, and disobedience flourish in a perceived world of scarcity. Trust, belief, and obedience flourish in a perceived world of abundance. Perception of abundance and scarcity have little to do with actual abundance of scarcity.

Abraham *resisted the temptation* and he *passed the test*. The two go hand-in-hand: resisting the temptation and passing the test. The opposite is to succumb to the temptation and fail the test. He remained faithfully obedient to God’s word throughout. But God took him right up to the very limit:

**Abraham built an altar and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. (Gen 22:9-10)**

Six actions by Abraham in slower and slower motion. Knife in hand and hand raised to strike, only then does God speak up:

**“Abraham! Abraham! ...[Stop!]... Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.” (Gen 22:11-12)**

Now we find out the purpose of the test: so that God could learn something about Abraham. But was it God who needed to learn this? Surely Abraham also learnt. God pushed Abraham to the absolute limit, and Abraham learnt that God was trustworthy. I am sure that now he had an unshakeable confidence in God. He now lived in a world of great abundance. He could live with abandon. He was free. He had no need to hold on to things or people.

Abraham did not live to see his seed become a mighty people. He did not take possession of the Promised Land, other than the burial cave. But he had God himself. God had given him the gift of himself. That was abundance. A little later, when he sought that burial

place for Sarah, he told the Hittites, “I am a foreigner and stranger among you” (Gen 23:4). He was content being still a stranger in the land. He was at home in God. Abraham indeed became the Father of Faith.

But not all of his descendants shared this faith. The counterpart to the many OT people of faith in Hebrews 11 is the wilderness generation in chapter 3. They flipped the tables. They put God to the test. They grumbled incessantly, they doubted God’s provision, then they complained about it when it came. Finally they rejected God and Moses and wanted to go back to Egypt. They failed the test. They looked back longingly and they wanted to go back. As a result they failed to complete their journey. They died in the wilderness, all except Joshua and Caleb.

**And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief. (Heb 3:18-19)**

They serve as a warning. The preacher quotes from Psalm 95:

**“Today, if you hear his voice,  
do not harden your hearts  
as you did in the rebellion,  
during the time of testing in the wilderness,  
where your ancestors tested and tried me,  
though for forty years they saw what I did.”**

(Heb 3:7b-9; Ps 95:7b-9)

This warning applied to Israel at the time the psalm was written. The warning still stands to the preacher’s hearers. It still stands today.

In addition to the role models of Hebrews 11, the readers, then and today, have a supreme model. God sent his one and only into the world. The eternal son became like us in two ways. First, he shared in our *humanity*, including our mortality. In helping “Abraham’s descendants...he had to be made like them, fully human in every way” (2:17). “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity” (2:14).

Secondly, he shared in our *suffering*, in our testing and tempting. “He was tempted in every way, just as we are” (4:15). “He himself suffered when he was tempted” (2:18). He was obedient unto death, even death on a cross (Phil 2:8). He resisted the taunts, tempting him to come down off the cross. God took him to the very limit, and then beyond. “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all” (Rom 8:32).

At the end Jesus called out, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46). “It is finished!” And he handed over his spirit (John 19:30). What was finished? His life of faithful obedience, fulfilling his Father’s will. He died with his faith and faithfulness intact. To whom did he hand over his spirit? He offered up to his Father a life well-lived, a life of faithful obedience from beginning to end. A human life perfected, lived to its *telos*, its end point. What a fragrant aroma! What a soothing savor! It was well received by the Father. Jesus had finished the mission on which the Father had sent him, to live a faithful human life.

The Father raised his beloved Son, his one and only, from the dead—the better resurrection. Forty days later Jesus ascended into the Father’s presence where he presented his own life blood for cleansing and for sealing a new covenant. Jesus is the true ascension offering.

We all face testing and temptation; we face suffering. But help is available:

Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. (2:18)

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (4:15-16)

Abraham was tested. His faithfulness was proved through such testing. His faith was approved, commended to subsequent generations as an example, including here in the Hall of Faith. Jesus was tested. His faithfulness was proved through testing and suffering: in the wilderness, in the garden, and finally on the cross. His faithfulness was approved in the resurrection and the ascension. The faithful life of the second Adam counteracted the unfaithfulness of the first Adam. We are all invited to come to him and be incorporated into his faithfulness.

Faithful Abraham has received much attention in this Hall of Faith: twelve verses. He is worthy, for he is the faithful founding father of a new humanity. When called to go, he was obedient and went. When tested, he offered up Isaac. At both ends of his spiritual odyssey he was faithful.

The next three verses cover the next three generations in quick succession. The common theme is that, approaching death, each looked forward to future generations. Each was confident that there would be a future.

## 2. Isaac (11:20)

**By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future. (11:20)**

When Isaac was old he blessed his twin sons. He intended to bless Esau, the older twin, but through his blindness and the trickery and deceit of Rebekah and Jacob, he actually blessed younger Jacob (Gen 27). Abraham's clan was by no means perfect! There was plenty of drama! But God worked through this imperfect clan.

By faith Isaac conveyed the Abrahamic blessing to the next generation. He had faith that there would be future generations in which God's promises would be fulfilled.

## 3. Jacob (11:21)

**By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff. (11:21)**

When Jacob was dying, he was no longer in the land. He was in Egypt together with his sons. He did bless his twelve sons, prophesying of what would become of them in the future when they became the tribes of Israel (Gen 49). But immediately before that he blessed Joseph's two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim (Gen 48). Here, too, Jacob blessed them in reverse order: the younger Ephraim before the older Manasseh, despite Joseph's efforts to prevent this. Ephraim and Manasseh would be the progenitors of two of the tribes of Israel in place of Joseph. This meant thirteen tribes, allowing Levi to be set apart for service in the tabernacle.

## 4. Joseph (11:22)

**By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions concerning the burial of his bones. (11:22)**

Joseph had spent most of his life in Egypt. He had suffered much treachery and ill-treatment at the hands of his brothers and Potiphar's wife. But the Lord had used him for the preservation of life, notably the lives of Abraham's descendants. Pharaoh gave him an Egyptian name, Zaphenath-paneah, and an Egyptian wife, Asenath the daughter of an Egyptian priest. She bore him two sons. But as he named these two sons Joseph was mindful of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He gave them Hebrew names not Egyptian.

When Joseph died the Egyptians "embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt" (Gen 50:26). Just like a Pharaoh or high official. Thus ends Genesis. But Joseph had an eye to the future, and it was not lying embalmed in a coffin in Egypt. He was confident that there would be an "exodus of the Israelites from Egypt." He made the sons of Israel swear an oath and said, "God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place" (50:25). And so they did centuries later: "Moses took the bones of Joseph with him" (Exod 13:19). The Israelites buried the bones in Shechem, in the piece of land that Jacob had bought (Josh 24:32).

Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph were each able to look ahead and see the future. By faith they could "see" things as yet unseen, things that were in the realm of hope. That is what this chapter is about:

**Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (Heb 11:1)**

Things hoped for are things not seen, because they lie in the future. Faith accepts that these unseen things are true, whether in the future or in the present in an unseen realm. The patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and also Joseph, exhibited both faith and hope. They had a forward-looking horizon beyond their death.

The author describes this document as a "word of exhortation" (13:22). His purpose is to encourage his beloved brothers and sisters to keep going, to keep persevering in the faith. He has two primary exhortations. First, keep looking forward to the finish line. Keep looking ahead, like Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. We fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. He has run the human course. He has pioneered the way through death into the new creation. He has opened the way into God's presence. He is the perfecter of faith. He lived a faithful life to its *telos*, the perfection of a human being. He has crossed the finish line. There at the finish line is the great cloud of witnesses, the OT saints who lived by faith. They are cheering us on as we run they race. Also they are waiting for us so that together we might all be made perfect.

Secondly, he exhorts us to keep meeting together to encourage one another (10:25) and to "keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters" (13:1).

If we need help, and we always do, we can boldly approach the throne of grace, where we have a merciful and faithful high priest. He is able to help those who are being tested and tempted. He was tested and tempted himself, and proved faithful. He passed the test. He will help us pass the test.