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Title: Discussing the Faith of Abraham (I)

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Scripture: Hebrews 11:17-19

Greetings in peace. Today's scripture is from Hebrews 11:17-19.

17 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son,

18 even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned."

19 Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death. Amen.

Today's sermon titled is "Discussing the Faith of Abraham," the first session. Somehow, whether it be Jews or Muslims, as recorded in Matthew 3:9, they both take great pride in Abraham being their ancestor. We too do not hesitate to refer to Abraham as the father of faith. But why did Jesus devalue Abraham and his descendants in the latter part of Matthew 3:9? "And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham" (Matthew 3:9).

In Genesis 12:4, we learn that God first called Abraham when he was 75 years old. God's call to Abraham came with two significant promises of blessings. The first, recorded in Genesis 12:1, was "Leave your country, your people, and your father's household and go to the land I will show you." This was a land flowing with milk and honey. The second promise, recorded in verse 2, was "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing." Ultimately, Abraham did become the father of a great nation and a source of blessing, just as God had promised. But can we say that Abraham's achievements were solely the result of his obedience and faith? Surprisingly, the answer is no.

After calling Abraham, God was always with him. From the age of 75, when God first called him, until he was 100, when he had Isaac, God protected and blessed him through every crisis during those long years. God was with him for about 40 years until Isaac, the child of promise, grew up and became a young boy. Despite this, God did not see the complete faith required in Abraham that would merit the blessings promised when He first called him.

Even after the promised child Isaac was born and grew up to be a young boy, God could not see whether Abraham truly believed in and feared Him. This is why, in Genesis 22, we see God testing Abraham's faith. In Genesis 22:2, God said to 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 a mountain I will show you." God did not command this because He desired Isaac. Rather, God wanted to test Abraham to confirm his faith, which He could not fully acknowledge, by instructing him to offer his son as a burnt offering.

Fortunately, this time, Abraham's faith was firm and unwavering before God. We can confirm the steadfastness of Abraham's faith by referring to the judgment found in Hebrews 11:17. "By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son."

The statement "was about to sacrifice his one and only son" seems contradictory since Isaac was the promised child. Continuing to verse 18, it states, "Even though God had said to him, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.'" According to this statement, the promise could only be fulfilled if descendants came through Isaac. Yet, God commanded Abraham to offer Isaac as a burnt offering, which seems contradictory. Despite this, Abraham was willing to offer his son.

Abraham could do this because he believed in God's promise that "it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." Additionally, as stated in Hebrews 11:19, Abraham believed without a doubt that God could raise his son from the

dead. This unwavering belief in God's omnipotence allowed Abraham to lay his son on the altar and raise the knife to sacrifice him.

And what did God say next? Genesis 22:12 records it this way: "Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son." God said, "Now I know." It took about 40 years after God first called Abraham for Him to say, "Now I know." Despite all the protection and numerous miracles that God provided to Abraham during that time, God could not be sure whether Abraham truly believed in Him or not.

So, after God called Abraham, what was Abraham's faith like until God could finally say "Now I know"? It was uncertain, or perhaps there was no faith at all. Let me share with you some examples from Abraham's life.

Let me first introduce one of the two blessings God promised to Abraham when He called him. Genesis 12:2 says, "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing." The covenant "I will make you" refers to making a great nation from the child born to Abraham and his wife Sarah. The promise was to make a great nation from the child born to them as a couple, so it was not a difficult promise to understand. Despite this clear promise, Abraham's response was quite different from what God had said.

In Genesis 14:4, we see that when Abraham left his homeland, he took his nephew Lot with him. Why did he take his nephew? When God called Abraham, he was 75 years old, and at that time, he and his wife had no children. They had no one to call them "father" or "mother." Thus, they probably thought to take at least a nephew who could call them "uncle" and "aunt." Since Abraham and his wife had no children at that age, they were called "Abram" and "Sarai," which meant a childless couple according to the custom of the time.

This reminds me of the movie "Dances with Wolves." The title of the movie is actually a person's name. The male protagonist was named after the sight of him dancing with a wolf, which was a custom among the Native American

Indians in that movie. Similarly, the names "Abram" and "Sarai" were given to fit their circumstances of being childless. Therefore, Abraham took his nephew Lot as an adopted son to find some comfort and, although it was a compromise, to continue his lineage through him. Given their childless situation, this might have seemed like a natural course of action for them.

However, God's calling of Abraham was based on a plan entirely different from Abraham's own thoughts. Genesis 12:2 records, "I will make you into a great nation." This promise means that God would make a great nation from Abraham and his wife. The promise included the condition "you and your wife." If Abraham had even a minimal amount of faith in this promise, he would not have considered taking his nephew with him. Even if his nephew had been living with him before Abraham received God's promise, he could have sent his nephew back to his parents after receiving the promise.

Perhaps because Lot was not the promised figure, Lot eventually left Abraham and went to the large city of Sodom, which he had chosen, and it turned out to be a poor choice.

Not long after Lot left, Abraham and Sarah made another misguided decision together again. They agreed to have Sarah's maidservant, Hagar, sleep with Abraham. As a result, a son named Ishmael was born from their union. Perhaps Abraham and Sarah thought that if they delayed any longer, they would not have any children at all. Considering these actions, could God see them as having faith in Him? Certainly not.

Despite this, God presented another plan. Genesis 17:5 records, "No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations." God changed their names because, by living as "Abram" and "Sarai," they acted without faith, settling for Lot and Ishmael. Therefore, God renamed Abram to Abraham and Sarai to Sarah, blessing them to become the father and mother of many nations. He also promised that kings of peoples would come from Sarah. This shows God's unwavering determination to fulfill the initial promise He made to Abraham.

God continued to speak to Abraham in Genesis 17:21 as follows: "But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year." When God says He will return the next year and establish His covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to Abraham, shouldn't they have believed God's promise even if there were no signs of Sarah being pregnant at that time? If God said so, wouldn't Sarah have already been pregnant by then? After all, God said that by the next year, the child born to Sarah would be the one to continue the covenant.

Do not be surprised. Even after God said this, Abraham and Sarah did not believe God's words up to that very moment. Is this surprising to you? Perhaps you think it couldn't have been so. However, let's look at the evidence. Genesis 17:17 records: "Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, 'Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?'" Abraham laughed and muttered to himself, "Will a man a hundred years old have a son?" Abraham, in front of God's promise, laughed and doubted. How could he do this before God?

At that moment, Abraham had another misguided thought. Genesis 17:18 records, "And Abraham said to God, 'If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!'" This means Abraham was suggesting that they could live with Ishmael, the son he had created with Hagar. It's almost hard to believe that Abraham, who is called the father of faith, would say such a thing. But it is true. If Abraham had had even the slightest faith and reverence for God, he would not have said this.

Isaac was born when Abraham and Sarah's faith was this weak and inadequate. Can we say that Isaac was the result of Abraham's faith? If the story of Abraham ended here, we couldn't call him the father of faith.

However, the Abraham we see in Genesis 22 is different from the previous Abraham. Until then, Abraham had not shown the kind of faith that would earn God's approval. Nevertheless, God continued to fulfill the initial promise He

made to Abraham without wavering. Even though Abraham's faith was still weak, God fulfilled His promise when the time came, just as He had intended from the beginning. This is why He gave Abraham his son Isaac.

When God saw Abraham offering his beloved son to Him, He finally recognized Abraham's faith. God called Abraham when he was 75 years old, and by now Abraham was well over 100 years old. It took about 40 years for Abraham to become a man of faith that God acknowledged. During this time, Abraham alternated between disbelief and faith, repentance and worship, failure and success. It was only in Genesis 22 that Abraham finally reached the level of faith that God desired. Seeing Abraham's faith, God was so pleased that He immediately expressed His heart in Genesis 22:12: "Now I know that you fear God."

God's assistance to Abraham was not because Abraham had great faith. Nor did God help Abraham in proportion to his faith. Rather, because Abraham's faith was weak, God helped him grow his faith to the level that He could recognize.

That's right. God did not help Abraham because his faith was great. Rather, He helped him because his faith was weak. Additionally, God tells us to consider Abraham as the "father of faith" not because his faith was exemplary, but precisely because his faith was weak.

What does this mean? It means that we are to model our faith after Abraham's because, throughout most of his life, his faith was at a very low level. Even though Abraham's faith was not strong, God continued to bless him and help him understand, nurturing his faith until it became firm. God helped Abraham until his faith became certain. Therefore, God will help us until our faith becomes certain as well. The same God who helped Abraham is also our God.

That's right. Let us confess once more:

O God of Abraham! Our faith is as weak as Abraham's was in the beginning. We are still far from having the level of faith that You acknowledge. O God of Abraham, help us who have faith as poor as Abraham's had once been. We too

desire to have the faith that You recognize. Let the God of Abraham be our God as well and help us so that our faith can reach that level.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father,

Even though we should accept the truths presented in the Bible as they are, we have interpreted them according to our preconceived notions. Reflecting on Abraham today, we realize the misunderstandings we have had. The descendants of Abraham have considered him a great father of faith, focusing only on the end of his journey. They also believe that they are automatically a blessed people because of Abraham. We, who were Gentiles and came to believe in God, have followed their example, calling Abraham the "father of faith" repeatedly. We have often admired Abraham's faith, thinking it was great from the beginning and believing that he received God's protection and blessings because of his strong faith. Therefore, we have taken Abraham as a model of our faith, referring to him as the "father of faith."

However, as we follow the exposition of Hebrews, we realize that Abraham's faith was indeed weak. We understand now that he became the father of faith not because his faith was strong, but because he had faith as weak as ours. To the God who patiently waited and blessed Abraham to grow his faith, we desire You to be our God as well.

Oh, Lord,

Please hear this confession we make based on our new understanding. Let the God of Abraham be with us as well. Help us to reach the point where You can say to us, "Now I know that you fear God." Help us to ultimately achieve this.

We earnestly pray in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen, Amen.