

Hebrews 11:17-21

Last time we started with what I see as a few sections in this chapter of faith. In my mind [verses 1-3](#) provide three powerful realities of our faith in Jesus. Last week we read through them and saw the truth of [verse 1](#) matched to the examples given in [verses 4-12](#), and then summed up in [verses 13-16](#). Now the reason I'm reviewing this is today is I think we now have the reality of [verse 2](#) matched up with the examples in [verses 17-29](#). For that reason we're going to start with [verse 2](#) and then jump forward to [verse 17](#).

²*For by it (faith) the elders obtained a good testimony.*

We need to ask a question here. Who were the elders? The word here points to the patriarchs and the early figures who put their faith in God. And today we are going to look specifically at the patriarchs of the faith [1](#)) Abraham, [2](#)) Isaac, [3](#)) and Jacob. And we're going to see how their faith in God caused God to cleanse the portions of their record that were not so stellar. And in doing so (even though your record is spotless 😊), I believe the Holy Spirit wants you to understand this incredible benefit of your placing your faith in Jesus (see [Rom. 4:16-25](#)).

- So [1](#)) how does this work, [2](#)) who is doing this work, [3](#)) and why? Let's start with the verses I told you about in our last study that covers this. [1 Cor. 3:10-15](#) *According to the grace of God which was given to me (Paul speaking), as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.*
- When we stand before God the Father, the only thing He will see when He looks upon us is the righteousness of Jesus. In reality that's what God the Father sees even now. [Rom. 3:21-22](#) tells us, *"But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed...through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe..."* There are many truths in these verses, but we will focus on two. They are "now" and "on", which doesn't speak in future tense. **Your faith in Jesus has produced the righteousness of God on you already!**
- Now do not be mistaken. This does not mean God ignores our present and future sin, because He is taking us through the process of sanctification (which is the work of transformation to become more like Jesus). But it means our legal standing before God the Father comes with the verdict of "righteous". And it's all based on what Jesus has done.

Now before we jump into the verses, I think we should note the obvious. The world does not display the grace of God. That should come as no surprise. You do something that others can hold over you and they likely will. Especially when it benefits them or strengthens their standing or rationale for some action of theirs. **The real question for us should be how is the church to respond?** Well, the bible tells us it is the glory of man to overlook the transgression or sin of another ([Prov. 19:11](#)). And Just like Gods standard, that doesn't mean there is no accountability. That would be counter scriptural. **But it does mean when there has been repentance, the same level of grace we have received from God is what we are required to give to one another** ([James 2:13](#), [Matt. 6:14-15](#) & [18:21-35](#)). So how are we doing in this regard? I'm afraid the church is a real mess in this area. [1](#)) Some have used this to cover up terrible things that have not been made right according to the biblical instruction we have. [2](#)) While others call it righteous indignation to withhold grace and blot out those transgressions which have already been dealt with and covered by the blood of Jesus. Faith means we can trust God to take care of the details that come next.

¹⁷ *By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, ¹⁸ of whom it was said, "In Isaac your seed shall be called," ¹⁹ concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense.*

This chapter focuses on faith, so it's not illogical to see the subject of God testing Abraham's faith here. But I do think many wonder **why** God would do such a thing. For example, did God test Abraham because God didn't know what Abraham would do? If that were the case then God couldn't be outside of time and present everywhere all at once- something the bible makes very clear He is ([Psa. 90:2-4](#) & [139:7-10](#), [Isa. 57:15](#)).

- The reasons God tested Abraham were **1)** so Abraham could discover where he was at and where he needed to grow in faith (for his benefit), and **2)** to give all of us a prefiguring of what God would do for our salvation (for our benefit). But before we unpack those things, let's first look into some of those not-so-great moments of his life we already mentioned are recorded in the bible.
- I'm certainly not disparaging Abraham in the least, but I am so grateful God chose to give us some of the shortcomings of his also. Such as when God called him to leave Ur, we hear he deviated from God's plan by **1)** taking **family** members with him that he was told not to, and **2)** by getting right to the edge of his home country in a town called **Haran** (meaning "delayed"), and camping there for 15 years before moving forward as instructed by God (**Gen 12**). Of course none of us have ever deviated from God's instruction or put off doing what God has told us, yet somehow, I think we can relate 😊.

And we know when Sarah **laughed in unbelief**, when she heard God tell Abraham that she would conceive in her old age. And after waiting for that promise to be fulfilled, **decided she needed to help God** since He was taking too long. So she offered Abraham her servant girl they likely picked up from Egypt (in another debacle we'll come back to [**Gen. 16**]) to be the surrogate mother of their child. Which I'm pretty sure shows a lack of faith in this incident in the promise of God on both their parts.

- But even in their lack of faith, later God would cause Sarah to conceive. And it's in this miracle that leads where we are picking up today since it was this child, through who God promised all these innumerable descendants were to come through (**Heb. 11:12**), who God now calls Abraham to sacrifice.
- So Abraham, operating on the faith of God's promise of innumerable descendants through Isaac, was prepared to do exactly that, when the angel of the Lord called out to him "*Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me*" (**Gen 22:12**). And the fact that Abraham believe God could and would raise Isaac from the dead, is even more amazing since **there is no place in the bible prior** to this where God had raised anyone up from the dead. This is the act of great faith for which Abraham is commended here.
- And what is so amazing is we see that this same area is where he and Sarah at one time showed a complete lack of faith. But that now it has been expunged from their record by God. In other words, by faith they **obtained a good testimony**. Have you come to the understanding that God has done the same for you if you have placed your faith in Jesus?

Now before we move on, I mentioned another reason God tested Abraham was for our benefit in the foreshadowing of Jesus. So here are some of the ways He did so. **1)** The Holy Spirit uses this specific language of Isaac being the only begotten son (the same term God uses of Jesus [**John 3:16**]), **2)** and God the Father would willing offer up His son just as Abraham in obedience would offer up his, who would carry the wood on which he would be sacrificed (the same thing Jesus did in carrying the horizontal section of the cross on which He'd be sacrificed [**John 19:17**]). **3)** Isaac could have easily resisted Abraham, just as Jesus (**Phil. 2:8**), he willing submitted to the will of his father. **4)** And we should know that Mount Moriah is the location where the temple would be built in Jerusalem, and the mountain upon which Jesus was crucified. **5)** We also find in this account the reality of substitutionary atonement, for God provided a ram in place of the man (**Gen. 22:13-14**) (and we know Jesus died in our place to pay a debt He did not own, because we had a debt we couldn't pay [**1 Pet. 1:19-21**]). **6)** And finally, we have the prefiguring of the resurrection power of God that would bring Jesus up out of the grave (**1 Cor. 15:3-4**). Folks, He has been telling and showing this love story to us from the beginning (**Heb. 10:7**). I hope, by faith, you have asked Jesus to be your savior (**Gal. 3:22, Eph. 2:8-9**).

Now the next two examples of the patriarchs deal with their preparing to die and therefore continuing to pass on the blessing. Which is fitting because so much of what we have already covered is regarding the promise of what comes after this body dies. And, as we looked at last week, both **verse 13 & 39** mention **1)** **these did not see the first coming of Jesus** **2)** **nor the promise of His coming reign in their lifetimes**. But that in their minds eye they could.

- So by faith, death had no hold over them (see also **2:14-15**). Also meaning they would see their family, who put their faith in God, again. And there are a few too many who believe in Jesus today that are gripped by the fear of death. Not these men. And I hope not you. By faith place your whole life, its duration, and your family in the promises of God.

²⁰ By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come.

Just like his father Abraham (and truly every one of us) Isaac had his issues too. One in particular was [Gen. 26:6-11](#) just as Abraham lied about Sarah being his sister out of fear- twice ([Gen. 12 & 20](#)), Isaac also lied about Rebekah being his sister. So, not perfect people.

- Realistically, the bible doesn't give us a lot about Isaac, even though it was through him the descendants promised to Abraham would come. But here is quick rundown of what we do have that relates to the mention of Isaac for his faith in God.

In [Gen. 25:19-28](#) we hear that Rebekah (like Sarah) was barren but then through the prayer of Isaac she was able to conceive. And when she felt like something was wrong with the baby in her womb, she sought God and He told her she had twins and these boys were wrestling with each other in her womb. And it's there that God tells her, "*the older shall serve the younger*" ([Gen 25:23](#)). So after Esau comes out first, we are told that Jacob reach out from the womb and grabbed his brother Esau's heel (Jacob meaning "heel snatcher"). These are important details you must have to make sense of where the Holy Spirit is going here.

- Then in [Gen. 25:20-34](#), when these boys are full grown, we find the account of Esau being famished, and upon smelling a stew Jacob was cooking, Esau willingly traded his birthright for a bowl of stew. And to that account the Lord tells us the way He saw such an act, saying "*Thus Esau despised his birthright*" ([Gen 25:34](#), [Heb. 12:16-17](#)) or the headship of the family and a double portion ([Deut. 21:17](#)) which he traded to Jacob for a meal ([25:34](#)).
- Then we come to [Gen. 27](#), and we find Isaac is about to die, so he calls Esau (who he knew God had said the birthright was not going to) and tells him to go hunting, bring some of his fresh cooked food, so that Isaac may give him the blessing. Rebekah overhears and calls Jacob to deceive his mostly blind father into believing he is Esau so he can manipulate him into giving the blessing to him.
- And that's exactly how it goes down. We'll come back to the details when we come back to Jacob in the next verse because this account is about how Isaac got busted and how that equaled him being a man of faith (our God is so gracious to us).

If you read this account in [Gen. 27](#), you hear that when Isaac understands he was deceived by Jacob, and Esau comes in and asks Isaac to take the blessing back so he can have it, **Isaac says no**. Why? Afterall, Jacob had completely deceived and directly lied to him multiple times. Why not take it back? *I think he knew he got caught by God for trying to go against what He had said and therefore got deeply convicted*. And with that conviction he gained enough wisdom to stop trying to circumvent God's word.

- So now that we have the big picture here, *doesn't it seem strange the Holy Spirit recounts this event as the cause by which God declares Isaac a man of faith?* He could have chosen another untainted event, like when he realized his father Abraham was going to sacrifice him out of obedience as an offering to the LORD, but instead purposely chose this one. Why?
- I'm betting you know the answer by now. But let's go down this road anyway. I think this is totally for our benefit so that God could display the truth of [verse 2](#) again. And that is *by faith the elders obtained a good testimony*.

I'm so grateful the very thing for which faith was ascribed to Isaac was not in submitting to be offered up as a sacrifice to God, but for something he handled wrong through almost the entire length of his life with his sons. And which he only corrects at the very end, after trying to undo the plan of God, and then having to get **tricked to make the declaration of God stand**.

- Maybe there's something in your life that you know you were instructed by God to move in faith for, and having delayed this long **you think it's too late**. This account tells us that is not the case.
- In faith, submit it to God and then wait and see what He does with the situation. Knowing He's also doing something amazing with your previously tainted testimony by your faith in the work of Jesus.

²¹ By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff.

Now we have more information regarding Jacob. And might I say a lot of it tells us he is a guy we probably wouldn't have trusted too much. There are five accounts of God interacting with him and four of them contain some sort of course correction. He was quite the schemer. But what we can also see is he (unlike his brother) strongly desired the blessing that would come over his family because of the promise of God which began with

Abraham. After all, it was Jacob that made the proposition to his hungry brother that he would trade him a bowl of stew for his birthright. Poor execution, yet a solid desire based on faith in what God had promised.

- In the same account as we just covered with Isaac, we find that Rebekah was certainly guilty of telling her son Jacob to deceive her husband and his father. But Jacob didn't object over the idea. He just worried he couldn't pull it off. So with some coaching, we find he **first** of all had to find a way to overcome the way his nearly blind father could tell the bodies apart and that was touch. Esau is recorded as being very hairy while Jacob had smooth skin. So Jacob took the skins of one of the goats they slaughtered for the meal and placed it on his hands, arms, and back of his neck. And although that's gross, it worked. **2)** And obviously this involved him lying directly to his father's face multiple times. **3)** But when his father asks how he was able to find an animal so quickly, Jacob brings God's name into the lie (verse 20).
- Later we have an account of Jacob wrestling with God all night (Gen. 32:24-32, Hos. 12:3-4) and refuses to let go until God blessed him. Again, showing his faith in the promises of God. The very thing this chapter and this verse highlights. And its in this event that God changes his name from Jacob (also translated "supplanter" or "deceiver", to Israel. In this move alone God is rewriting his testimony.
- But God is not done yet. For we see that for all Jacobs short comings, he goes out passing on the same blessing to his two grandsons, believing in all His heart that God will honor that and keep His promise. And in doing so, he told them of the blessing he had received first, when "*God Almighty appeared*" to bless him by pronouncing he would have a multitude of descendants (Gen. 48:3). And he died believing God would receive him into His kingdom. Which God did, because He looked upon Jacob's faith in Him. And evaluated his life by his faith alone.

If we had to pick our testimony from among these three, I think many of us would prefer the cleanest one in the list. But reality is the past is that when we place our faith in Jesus, our past is not just our past. Our testimony is washed in the blood of the Lamb (Jesus). And His testimony upon us is what the Father now sees.

- **1)** 2 Cor. 5:21 tells us that Jesus became sin (or took our sin upon Himself) that we might become the righteousness of God. How is that possible? By faith and faith alone! **2)** In Isa. 1:17 we heard the that though, our sin which was like scarlet, He can wash us white as snow. How do you access that cleansing? Through faith! **3)** And 1 Cor. 6:11 tells us that if you have put your faith in Jesus, "*you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.*" It is now- not just something in the future.
- Folks, some of our stories in this room are far worse than what we read today, or significantly less colorful. And regardless of where you fell on the spectrum, by faith in Jesus Christ, you have *obtained a good testimony* by the grace of God through faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ.
- And if that blows your mind like it does mine, that's good. But let it do more than that. Receive it by faith. Which means you must stop living in the past, its shame, its condemnation, and therefore its grip. Receive your new identity furnished by the love of God (2 Cor. 5:17). And like Jacob, just *worship* God for doing in you and your testimony what you could never have done for yourself.