

Tuesday Evening Bible Study at Tokyo Baptist Church
The Letter to the Hebrews – Chapter 11, Verses 17-19
Notes From Class on March 9, 2010
Last Revised on (March 10, 2010)

Songs

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father, we ask your help and your protection this evening.

Please reveal yourself to us tonight through what we read

Please guide us into a right understanding of all that we read

and protect us from mistakes in our understanding, and from all evil.

Please let our understanding be real, and deep

The kind of understanding which bears fruit and produces good works

Works which prove our faith and bring you glory.

Help us persevere and endure through trial and temptation.

Bringing us safely home to heaven in the end.

And making us, as Abraham was, your friends.

In Jesus Name.

Amen

Introduction

Welcome and thanks for coming to our weekly Bible study.

Presently, as you know, we are studying the New Testament Book of **Hebrews**.

Last week our discussion took us to Verse **16** of Chapter **11**

Tonight we will continue reading, starting at Verse **17**.

But first let's begin, as usual, with a quick review.

And before our review, let me give you a chance to get whatever you might need.

There is coffee and tea at the back.

Also there are two handouts for this evening.

One handout has the ESV text of Hebrews.

The other has the ESV text for Genesis 22:1-19 (on the one side) and some related passages (on the other)

Please get what you need and let's get started.

Review

As we have continually noted,

Hebrews appears to be the text of a **sermon**,

written around the end of the **First Century**, A.D,

to be delivered to a group of **Christians**

at least some of whom were in danger of "**falling away**"

and needed to be encouraged to "**hold fast.**"

The preacher reminds them of the **unqualified** supremacy of Christ **(1:1 - 3:6)**.

And urges them not to repeat the mistakes of the Children of **Israel**,

who have so often fallen away from **God**. **(3:7 - 4:13)**.

He describes Jesus as being like a great **high priest**. **(4:14 - 5:10)**

tries to make them understand that to reject **Jesus**, is to reject **all** hope of salvation. **(5:11 - 6:20)**

The old **priesthood** and **law** have been replaced by something better **(7:1 - 8:7)**.

The Old **Covenant** has been replaced by a **New** Covenant **(8:8-8:13)**.

The **ceremonies** and rituals of the Old Covenant are **obsolete**. **(Chapter 9)**

The death of **Christ** has atoned for sin --- once and for all **(Chapter 10:1-18)**.

All may draw near to God with confidence **(Chapter 10:19-22)**.

and if we **persevere** until the end, our souls shall be **preserved**.

But those who fall away from Christ, **destruction** awaits.

 This is a quick review of what we have studied to the end of **Chapter 10**.

The bottom line, it seems to me, is this:

 those who **trust** and **obey** God until the end shall be saved,

 and conversely, those who **are** saved **will** trust and obey God until the end.

 Any **comments** or **questions** to this point in our review?

 Two weeks ago, we began reading **Chapter 11**,

 in which we are given a series of examples of what "**saving faith**" looks like.

 With minor exceptions, these examples are arranged **chronologically**.

 Let me just note in passing that this whole treatment makes it plain that faith is something that can be **seen**,

 not **directly**, because only God sees the **heart**,

 but indirectly through the things that **happen** ... **because** of the faith which resides in a man's heart.

 It is by **faith** that a man knows that the universe is **created** by a **transcendent** God. (**Chapter 11:1-3**)

 It is by **faith** that a man (such as Abel) is able to **know** and **worship** God rightly (**Chapter 11:4**)

 It was by faith that **Enoch** maintained his special **relationship** with God (**Chapter 11:5-6**)

(n.b. In this case we know of the faith in Enoch's heart by the actions of God!)

 By faith **Noah** was able to **obey** and **trust** God through great tribulation (**Chapter 11: 7**)

 By faith **Abraham**, **Isaac**, and **Jacob** continued to obey God and trust in his **promises** despite the fact that only a small part of what they were promised would be fulfilled in their lifetime (**Chapter 11:8-10**)

 By faith **Sarah** finally looked beyond the utter **impossibility** of what she had been promised and received her son Isaac,

 and she rejoiced, although she was very old and would not live to **see** the fulfillment of most of the things promised **to** her offspring. (**Chapter 11:11-12**)

Last week we read verses 13 - 16 of Chapter 11. Let's read those **again** now.

Hebrews, Chapter 11, Verses 13-16

Would someone please read Hebrews Chapter 11, Verses **13-16**, in **Japanese**.

Thank you. Now would someone please read that same verse in English (ESV).

13 These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.

14 For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.

15 If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return.

16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.

Thank you.

It seems to me that this is a **consistent** teaching of the **whole** Bible,

whether it be Abraham or Moses or David or others in the **Old** Testament

or Paul or Peter or John or others in the **New** Testament,

even and especially Jesus Christ **himself**:

God's people are "citizens of **heaven**" and do not properly belong in this world.

Paul makes that very point in Philippians 3:18-21, which reads as follows

(Philippians 3:18-21)

For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. 19 Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. 20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

Indeed as Paul suggests, it is when we do try to "**settle**" in this world and make ourselves at home here that we get in trouble. (e.g. Abraham's nephew lot)

It is because we do **not** accommodate ourselves to this fallen world that God is not ashamed to call himself our God, and he has prepared for us a heavenly country.

Before we read on, does anyone have any **comments** or **questions**?

Hebrews, Chapter 11, Verses 17-19

OK. Would someone please read Hebrews Chapter 11, Verses **17-19**, in **Japanese**.

Thank you. Now would someone please read that same verse in English (ESV).

17 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son,

18 of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named."

19 He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

Thank you.

I think most of you **know** this story, don't you, of how Abraham offered up Isaac.

Q. **Where** do we find this story?

A. It is found in **Genesis**, Chapter **22**, Verses 1-19

This is one of the most **amazing** and, for some I suppose, one of the most **troubling** stories in the Bible.

God asks Abraham to **sacrifice** his son Isaac!

I think it is better that we go ahead and **read** it. (*do we need to read in Japanese too?*)

(Genesis Chapter 22, Verses 1-19)

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

2 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."

3 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.

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

5 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."

6 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 went both of them together.

7 And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here am I, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"

8 Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together.

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

10 Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son.

11 But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I."

12 He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."

13 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.

14 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."

15 And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven

16 and said, "By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son,

17 I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies,

18 and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice."

19 So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba. And Abraham lived at Beersheba.

OK. So in what we have **just** read from Genesis, Chapter 22, the first 19 verses,

God tells **Abraham** to go and sacrifice his son, **Isaac**.

Abraham **obeys** God.

But God **stops** Abraham before he is able to sacrifice Isaac.

In light of this, God promises to **bless** Abraham, Abraham's **descendants** and, through them, **all** nations of the earth.

Q. How do you **understand** this promise? (i.e. Genesis 22:**18**)

A. **Christ** and his Gospel. It is through Abraham that they come.

Indeed, as I like often to remind myself, the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the **only** reason that any of us **care what** Abraham did or **who** Abraham was!

Certainly the author of Hebrews is reading this passage from Genesis 22 from a **Christian** viewpoint.

Let's now look at how he uses this story within the context of his larger discussion of **faith**.

Hebrews, Chapter 11, Verse 17 reads

(Verse 17)

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son,

Q. **Who** is "he who had received the promises?"

A. **Abraham**. Yes.

Q. And what **were** these promises which he had received?

A. Land, Descendants, Blessings (To Be Their God!)

As we have been discussing, **almost** all of these promises were far in the **future**, and Abraham knew them only through faith.

But God had **already** blessed Abraham in some ways, most especially with the miraculous birth of **Isaac**.

Of course Abraham **loved** Isaac very much, and the Bible is at pains to make **this** clear.

Q. But why, **else**, was Isaac was so important to Abraham?

A. Because it was **through** Isaac that all of the **other** blessings were to come.

A. Indeed it was through **Isaac** that Christ himself was to come.

Abraham may **not** have understood about Christ as fully as we do now, but he certainly **did** know that Isaac was **the** connection between himself and all that God had promised Abraham, in time and eternity.

That is the point of Verse 18 which reads:

(Verse 18)

of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named."

It was **God** who had said this to Abraham,

to make it perfectly clear, that all that God had promised, would come through the line of **Isaac**,

and **not** through the line of Ishmael or any of Abraham's other sons.

OK, so if Isaac **were** to die then God's promises **could** not be fulfilled.

You need see that this is a **moral** impossibility (even a **logical** impossibility) not a physical impossibility.

I mean of **course** God had the **power** to make good on most of the promises in **other** ways.

e.g. through Ishmael, or other sons of Abraham, and etc.

but that would entail the abandonment of the **original** promise concerning **Isaac**, and God can't do that.

Or put another way, God **could** not do that, and still be God.

Yet, God instructs Abraham to **sacrifice** Isaac!

This is a real ... serious ... puzzle!

Q. **Why** does God do this?

(n.b. asking why God does things is sometimes not very helpful, but here the answer is given)

A. We are **told**: God was **testing** Abraham.

Q. But doesn't God already **know** everything?

A. Yes

Q. So then **why** does he order such a test?

A. To **prove** Abraham's faith to everyone **else**, including **Abraham!**

This is a test intended to **demonstrate** faith, not to discover it.

Like when we assay precious metals which we **already** know to be pure.

But wish to **demonstrate** the purity to others.

It is **this** test, perhaps more than any other, that demonstrates to **us** that Abraham is a great man of **faith**.

Q. But, wait a minute! If Abraham is such a **faithful** man, and if God himself told Abraham that all of the promised would come **though** Isaac, then by **killing** Isaac wouldn't Abraham be killing the **promises**?

Q. I mean wouldn't killing Isaac, have demonstrated that Abraham does **not** believe that all of these promises will come through Isaac?

That is the part of this puzzle that the author of Hebrews solves in **Verse 19**, which reads

(Verse 19)

He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

It is the understanding of the inspired author of Hebrews that Abraham **reasoned** in this way:

because all of God's promises depended on Isaac, it would be **impossible** for Abraham to kill Isaac and for Isaac to remain dead.

Or in other words Abraham **assumed** that God would reverse the death sentence under which God had placed Isaac!

Or in still other words, sorting this thing out was...really **God's** problem...and not **Abraham's** problem.

Abraham would just **continue** believing in the **promises** and obeying the **word** of God even though it was hard for him to reconcile these two things in the present circumstances.

It was by **faith** that Abraham knew that Isaac would be coming down the mountain alive.

That is what the author of **Hebrews** is saying, isn't it?

And I think that the author of Hebrews is interpreting this story in a manner **consistent** with its presentation in the Old Testament,

because if you will recall, from what we read earlier (*Gn22.5*) when Abraham left his men with the donkeys and took Isaac up the hill to make the sacrifice, he told the men to wait there and that both he **and** Isaac would return following the sacrifice!

Truly Abraham was shown to be a very special man of faith and made a lasting **example** for us!

He **trusted** God and he **obeyed** God even when he could not understand how to reconcile these two things (i.e. trust and obedience)

And his faith was **justified** and the promises were **kept**.

And the salvation of **all mankind** was assured.

God saved the world...you and me...**through** Abraham's faith!

No wonder God was not ashamed to call himself the God of **Abraham**!

To **review**, before reading on...

Q. How do we **know** that Abraham had faith?

A. By what Abraham **did**!

His faith and his works were **connected**.

This is the point that is made in James, Chapter 2, Verses 14-24, which is on the back of your handout.

Let's read that.

(James 2:14-24)

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? 17 So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. 18 But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. 19 You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe---and shudder! 20 Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? 21 Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; 23 and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"---and he was called a friend of God. 24 You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

According to **James**, God called Abraham his **friend**, because of his faith, which was inextricably related to his **works** or, conversely, because of his works which could not be separated from his **faith**.

The two things are **bound** together.

If there can be such a thing as faith without works, then only God can see it.

But as for the rest of us, faith becomes known only or at least primarily through what **happens**,

through what we ourselves and others and God are seen to **do** amidst earthly circumstances.

In verse 23 (of James Chapter 2) James says that God called Abraham his **friend**.

This is apparently a reference to Isaiah 41:8, which is printed on your handout.

(Isaiah 41:8)

But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend;

This is rare and special and **astonishing** thing, that God should call anyone his "**friend**."

We may like to think of **ourselves** as "friends of God" as that song goes,

but we had better have a pretty good picture in our mind of what God's friends **look** like,

and **Abraham** is one example we are given.

He was prepared to obey God and sacrifice his only son at the cost of **absolutely** everything that mattered to him, trusting that God would **somehow** remain worthy of his **trust**.

He **was** God's friend.

He **knew** God.

He **trusted** God.

He **loved** God.

Likewise Jesus went to the cross at the cost of absolutely everything he had to give, trusting that God would somehow remain worthy of his trust. He **was** God's friend and, more than that, his dearly beloved **Son**.

God's friends **forsake** the world, as the **cost** of that friendship.

But God's **enemies** (on the other hand) seek to make friends with the **world** and to make themselves at **home** here.

Which is James' point in James 4:4, which reads.

(James 4:4)

You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

(n.b. this is where we ran out of time on March 9)

Closing Prayer

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father.

Please make us love you more, and the world less.

Please give us faith, like Abraham and the other men of old we are reading about.

Teach us to trust and to obey.

We know that if you call us your friend, things will be difficult

Even painful sometimes

As things were difficult and painful for your Son, Jesus.

But please sustain us through it

And please cause us to help one another through it.

We are looking forward to that Heavenly Jerusalem.

Come Lord Jesus.

Come quickly.

Amen.

Amen