

April 23, 2023

The Flawed Yet Faithful: part 2

“Abraham”

Hebrews 11:8-11 (17-19)

Intro:

Last Sunday we began a sermon series based in the “Faith” hall of fame chapter in Hebrews. In Hebrews 11, we find a long list of people who in the nation of Israel’s past are considered by the author of Hebrews to be the examples of what it looks like to live as people of faith. Further, the author of Hebrews counts these people as a great crowd of witnesses that surround and encourage all generations of believers in their faith journey. Their example and encouragement is for you and me.

Often, when the Hebrews 11 hall of faith is brought out, those reading or listening to it preached can get the impression that these are people who are special, they are the gold standard for what it means to be human, they are – for lack of better words sometimes – perfect. And as such it almost feels as though living up to their standards is almost impossible for the average individual. As we saw last week, though, these are not flawless people, but indeed do have some flaws in their character or actions. The tension is how do we reconcile that with the glowing references the author of Hebrews gives.

As I said last week, for all of those listed in Hebrews 11 their flaws do not define who they are or the depth of their faith. Their flaws do not make them more faithful; in fact they are faithful in spite of their flaws. And then we took a look at Rehoboam, who was also a flawed individual, but who was not faithful in obedience to God. If you recall, even though it seemed that at times Rehoboam was making faithful decisions, they were in fact more self-preserving and self-promoting, and the end result was that his Biblical legacy was an evil king that did not follow the Lord. This was so we could get a framework for which the rest of the series will progress. Having now understood how flaws do not support

faithfulness, let us turn back to Hebrews 11 to look at examples of flawed people who were still faithful.

Hebrews 11:

As you read through the faith hall of fame list, you will notice that there is a diminishing progression of description for each person, or section of people. The author starts out by giving fairly detailed and concise information about the individual, which would provide justification for their inclusion on the list. Then we move to just a list of names, but nothing about what they specifically did to earn the spot. And some of those folks raise many an eyebrow because they seem to be very out of place on this list of faithful heroes. Then, the author goes on to descriptions of what various people did but without connecting a name to those descriptions. It is this movement from individual specifics to nameless generalities that gives us the open door to see that we, Christians of (to the author of Hebrews) future generations, have the opportunity to stand as part of that great crowd of witnesses. All we need to do is release our flaws into God's providence and choose to have our faith define us and not our flaws.

Abraham:

As it would take entirely too long to cover each individual named and not named in Hebrews 11, we will focus on just a select few so that we can get a better understanding of what being flawed yet faithful looks like and how that can translate into our own lives.

We will begin with Abraham.

Hebrews identifies three major moments in Abraham's life that epitomize his faithfulness: (1) going to a land that he does not know anything about, (2) having a child in old age (along with Sarah, his wife), and (3) the willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac. I will grant you that the last high moment of faith for Abraham is a bit of a weird sounding one to our ears today. There is a lot more to Abraham's life than what we find in Hebrews though, and a lot more than what we can cover in one sermon as well. I would direct you to take some time this week to read his

whole story in Genesis chapters 12-25. For today, we will focus on the big three in Hebrews.

His story, or at least what we have of his story as recorded in the Bible, begins with his family living in a place called Ur in the land of the Chaldeans. This is the place that Abraham is called to leave from, to go to a new land that God will eventually show him – according to the Hebrews account. A little bit of historical license is utilized here to make the point that Abraham was faithful in being obedient to that call and heading out. The Genesis account tells us that Abraham had left Ur, not because God told him to, but because his father, Terah, had packed the family up, loaded them into a mini-van (or historical equivalent) and had already traipsed them part of the way to where God wanted Abraham to be. When God gave Abraham his marching orders, he was already settled with his father and family in the land of Haran. It is possible that Abraham held some thoughts of returning to Ur, which would make the concept of having been pulled out from his homeland of Ur and told to go to a new land, what we will later learn is Canaan, true to the spirit of things, if not literally accurate. It is a minor point, though and should not take away from the faithfulness of his obedience in going when God said to go.

Once in Canaan, he was not allowed to settle down and start building cities and establishing a democratic state. The promise, the reward for traipsing part ways across the then known world, was that he would not settle down there but instead his distant ancestors would. Abraham would live the rest of his life in the nomadic way – tents, travelling from place to place, and never “owning” or laying claim to any significant section of land (he does later on purchase a small section for the family cemetery, but that is all).

First faithful task done – he has gone into the unknown.

The second faithful task is to have a child. Remember that the promise from God is that Abraham’s descendants will get to have possession of the land of Canaan. A further promise to this is that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars

and as uncountable as the grains of sand. Quite the promise! The only problem is that Abraham and Sarah don't have any kids. And at this point, Abraham is old (100 when the promise fulfilled, Sarah being spring chicken of 90) and well past the age when fathering children is a sure thing. Also, Sarah is old. And she is barren – meaning that she is unable to get pregnant no matter what age anyone is.

But there is a promise, and even though both of them find the thought a bit laughable, they still trust that it will happen and believe in the promise that God will give them the multitude of descendants, as he has promised.

The third faithful task is for Abraham to then kill—well, it is couched in the more acceptable religious language of the time as “sacrifice”—that one son who God gives them as a couple and through whom all this great nation of descendants is to come... There are a lot of things to puzzle about with this particular task of faith, the least of which is why God who detests the child sacrificial systems of other nations, such as the system to the god Molech, would ask Abraham to do exactly that with Isaac.

This is a test, though. In fact, all of them have really been tests that God has given to Abraham to determine the level of his faith. And these aren't the only ones. If you read through Abraham's story, you will find a total of twelve faith tests along the way, all of them part of God's determining whether or not Abraham is worthy to be the father of the entire nation of Israel.

The “Isaac on the altar” test is the last one, and the concluding moment of God's pushing to see if Abraham's faith will hold. It does, and God is pleased. Abraham does such a good job of responding faithfully to all those tests that God counts Abraham as being righteous because of his faith (see Gen. 15:6).

For Abraham's part, his faith is unquestioning. With the exception of laughing at the absurdity of having children at his age, he absolutely believes that not only will God deliver on what he promises, but he will also protect and care for

Abraham's family – and that means Isaac as he is being placed on the altar as a sacrifice. Abraham knows that he must do this because his commitment to following God so strong. But he is also confident that God will not deprive him of this son of his. In this specific instance, this would mean raising Isaac from the dead and returning him to his father. Even as they unloaded the donkeys with all the burning materials and began their trek up to the altar, Abraham turns back to his servants and says “keep the motor running, we (notice that ‘we’ includes Abraham *and* Isaac) will be back shortly.) Of course, we know that God stops Abraham at the last moment and provides a ram for the sacrifice instead, thus returning Isaac from the dead, in a fashion.

The Flaws:

Up to this point, Abraham sounds like a superstar hero of faith. And that would be right, except he has a couple of flaws. The main flaw we know about is that he is a cowardly liar. Sarah is a very lovely woman, and as they travel from place to place in their nomadic lifestyle, other people notice her beauty and want her for themselves – especially, as it turns out, kings of other nations, including Egypt. Abraham's fear is not for Sarah, but for himself. If those powerful people find out that she is married to him, he fears they will kill him and just take her. So, he concocts a tale (lie) for them to tell so that his life won't be at risk. Simply that Sarah is his sister (sort of true, but only in a round about way – same father, different mother, so kind of a half-sister) and not his wife. This gets the king of Egypt and king Abimelech into trouble with God, and they then get mad at Abraham and, in the case of Egypt, kick Abraham out of the country.

The encounter with Abimelech has a slightly different outcome; you can find it in Genesis 20:1-17. After the confrontation and exposure of the lie, Abraham confesses his fears and self-centered behaviour regarding the truth of his relationship with Sarah. Recognizing that it is his blunder – lack of trusting faith, the flawedness of his character – that is causing the distress for Abimelech and his family, Abraham humbles himself before God and prays for their healing and, I believe, seeks forgiveness from them and from God.

There is also the flaw of trying to be in control of every aspect of his life. He is a rich person, a powerful person even – he mustered his own army to go after a king who had taken his nephew Lot captive – and powerful people are used to being in control of their own destiny. So, knowing that there is a promise for a multitude of descendants, and still no child-bearing ability from Sarah, she convinces Abraham to sleep with Hagar, her servant, so that they can possibly have a child through her.

This was a dumb idea and Abraham should have said no, but he didn't. The result was that Hagar got pregnant and began to treat Sarah poorly because Hagar thought she was better than Sarah because she was going to have Abraham's baby. Abraham refuses to get involved with the relational politics and basically allows Sarah to make whatever decisions about this that she wants to. Hagar is sent away with her son, Ishmael, only to be returned to the family because God has brought them back.

Tests of faith:

It is possible that Abraham corrected his flaws right away and was never bothered by them again, but the sheer number of tests of faith that he had to go through in his later years leads me to conclude that those flaws were things he struggled with until the end. Much like we do.

The tests were simply to see how he was doing on his journey of faith. Would the emergence of his flaws drive him to seek cover under his pillow until the issue went away? Now that he is fairly wealthy and carrying significant influence in the community, does He still need God? Is he really willing to give up his most prized thing – his and Sarah's son, simply because God asked him to (and did not provide a reason for that request until much later in their lives).

Abraham passed each test. With flying colors, most likely. You see, even though Abraham carried his flaws, he was not defined by them. They did not have more power over his life than the plan that God had for Him. And so he trusted in God's

plan and not his own. It would have been a similar scenario to that of Jesus' conversation with Peter on the shores of the lake after the resurrection.

Abraham's faith was solidly anchored in the truth that God knows what he is doing and that even if he (Abraham) doesn't, it still means that Abraham's response must be to place his focus on what he can do and leave the rest in God's hands to sort out for good.

Conclusion:

We are bombarded with the same sorts of tests in the midst of our flaws – they are many and constant through our days. How we respond to those tests will show a lot about our character and about our faithfulness to God. At any point, Abraham could have said “ok that's enough.” We have that same option. In the midst of all the things that test our faith, we have the freedom to just say “it's too hard, I'm done”. Our flaws would win at that point. Our faith would be beaten away and all that would be left would be our flaws. Our lives would then be defined by our flaws, our mistakes, and not by grace and love – which is how we should live as Christians.

Abraham shows us how to live faithfully in spite of the flaws we carry in our lives.

Let's pray.