

David Hrechuk - Hebrews 11, Part 2

Brethren we would like to resume our discussion of Hebrews chapter 11 that we began yesterday. For those who were not here yesterday, I am attempting to APPROACH this chapter in a different way by asking myself questions as I read. The point of these questions is to create a mental discussion that leads to a deeper understanding of what we read.

I have thought about how the apostle Paul tells us in 2 Timothy 3:16 that there are several ways to approach Bible study. One method is to use the Scriptures to instruct us in a doctrinal teaching. Another method is to use the Scriptures to recalibrate our behaviour. And the third method is to use the Scriptures to train us how to think spiritually and not humanly. I would like us to use this third method of Bible study, training our minds spiritually, by means of these questions, as we consider together the 11th Chapter of Hebrews.

Again, this chapter is very familiar to all of us. But I will confess that in the past I approached this chapter as merely a key to a doctrinal question. Which was, “What is an Ancient Worthy?” I would read the chapter in order to draw up a list of who was in and who was out! Now I am trying to read this chapter in order to find out what the author is trying to tell his audience. And what is the Lord trying to tell me?

First... a word about the background of Hebrews. It has been suggested that the book of Hebrews was a letter written as a discourse that was to be read by proxy in the meeting. It is a “synagogue sermon” commonly called by the phrase, “A word of Exhortation” as is found in Hebrews 13: 22 and Acts 13:15.

This discourse was intended to be given to a group of brethren who were in crisis. The crisis was not one of doctrine. The crisis was discouragement. These dear brethren were despondent as a group. The author of the sermon felt that they were in a very grave condition and in danger of losing their faith.

Whoever the author of this sermon was, he was well known to these brethren, but he kept his identity in the background for a reason. In keeping his identity in the background he is not using HIS authority or HIS superiority to bring them back into HIS way of thinking. He is not using his credentials to enforce compliance. Instead the tenor of this beautiful comforting discourse is persuasion.

Again I want to reiterate that the author’s method of encouragement is critical in our understanding of Hebrews Chapter 11. He is not asking these brethren in a crisis of despondency to do the impossible. Instead he gives them examples of what faith looks like in the midst of crisis, doubt and discouragement. With this background in mind, let us turn again to Hebrews 11 and pick up where we left off, which is with Sarah.

Before we begin with our next example of faith in Hebrews 11:11, we need to be aware that there is a grammatical problem within the text. It has to do with the phrase, “herself received

strength to conceive seed.” Just how difficult this grammatical puzzle is to translators can be realized when we look at the various translations. If you have the New Revised Standard, Abraham is the subject of verse 11. If you have the ESV or NIV translations they have Sarah as the subject of verse 11. Well, when language experts disagree, how can I decide which is correct? So for this discourse we will read the text that the majority of translations use and look at Sarah as the subject of verse 11. I think there are some encouraging lessons to be learned. We should also note that the phrase in the King James “and was delivered of a child” is not in the earliest Greek manuscripts. So we will just read the verse from the ESV. “By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. “

In order to understand the role of faith in this event let us begin by asking ourselves a question, “What does it mean that Sarah was ‘past the age’ of conceiving? This time the author of Hebrews did not have to read between the lines. In Genesis 18 beginning in verse 9, besides mentioning her old age twice, we are told that Sarah had entered menopause in verse 11. It is quite clear that what follows had to be a miraculous conception on Sarah’s behalf.

Let us notice that it is the writer of Genesis and not Sarah herself who is revealing this information. The writer is making it absolutely clear that SARAH herself could no longer have a child in verse 11. Why is that? Well let us hear what Sarah has to say in her own words in verse 12 of Genesis 18. Sarah has overheard the man of God saying that she will bear a child. To herself she says, “The thing has not as yet happened to me, even until now, and my lord is old.” In other words, “I haven’t gotten pregnant up to now, and NOW my lord is old.” Why is Abraham’s age mentioned as the primary reason she will not conceive? As we all know there is nothing biologically that happens to a male to stop his ability to reproduce. Instead age and lack of stamina limits his ability to perform the act of reproduction. Sarah is saying that it is not possible for her to have a child because age has stopped them from HAVING marital relations. The writer of Genesis confirms this saying that yes, Abraham was old. It was impossible from that perspective. And in addition, the writer of Genesis is saying Sarah was in menopause so it was impossible from that perspective. The birth of Isaac that follows was miraculous on both of their behalves.

Why then did the author of Hebrew’s state that Sarah’s faith had to bear a part in this miracle? Putting ourselves in Sarah’s position, she was obviously a high status wife. We know she had her own living quarters. We see the authority Abraham gave her in the matter of Hagar. It is easy to imagine, that at this stage of life especially, she could not be coerced by a husband to the marriage bed. Instead her faith in the promise propelled her to accept the resumption of marital relations. Nomadic life is not private. We can imagine how vulnerable they felt. How they were opening themselves up to ridicule by their many servants, including Hagar. What depth this gives to Sarah’s exclamation in Genesis 23: 6, when Isaac was born, “The LORD has made laughter for me, for whoever shall hear shall laugh with me.”

We would like to look a little closer at Sarah’s laughter as we focus on the phrase from Hebrews 11:11, “for she considered him faithful who had promised.” The word “considered” really does

mean “considered “ or “thought about.” And so we ask ourselves why did the author of Hebrews think that Sarah weighed the matter over in her mind? Let us turn back to Genesis 18. No doubt we remember the story. How that 3 men of God came to Abraham who treated them hospitably. One asked where Sarah was and Abraham told him in the tent behind them. He told Abraham that in a year’s time Sarah would be delivered of a son. And that is when Sarah who was listening, laughed within herself saying, “I haven’t gotten pregnant up to now and now my lord is old.” We aren’t told whether this is self deprecating laughter or humorous laughter of disbelief or even perhaps mocking laughter. We don’t know what her heart was actually feeling at this point. We do know though that when the man of God, still talking to Abraham, says, ‘Why is it that Sarah has laughed within herself saying, Shall I indeed bear, but I am grown old!’ that Sarah became frightened. Up to this time in the narrative there has been no indication that these three men were anything other than strangers traveling though. All of a sudden without ever seeing Sarah they have just read her mind. We can imagine that Sarah and Abraham are both frightened for they realize they are not dealing with men but with angels. From other scriptures the natural reaction to realizing that you are interacting with a materialized spirit being is utter fear that you will be struck down. Sarah, most likely in the grip of that fear, denies the laugh. But she is denied that face saving measure and told, “No, you did laugh.”

But what we did not read is the crux of this whole account and the point behind the author of Hebrew’s faith example. When the angel repeated what Sarah had just thought – that this promise that in a year she would have a son was impossible – the angel then responded to her thought. In verse 14 of Genesis 23 he says, “Is anything too hard for the LORD?” Here the angel, the Logos as we find later, invites Sarah to believe. He does not hold her doubts against her. Instead he gives her a reason to believe. The undeniable logic of this phrase, and all of hers and Abraham’s experiences to date, are what persuade Sarah to take part in the miracle of Isaac’s conception and birth. The author of Hebrews is using this same technique with his audience. He is persuading them to not cast away their confidence by giving them reasons to have confidence in their reward.

So what did the author of Hebrews want these discouraged brethren to take away from this example of Sarah’s faith? I will suggest the following: Faith does not mean absence of doubt. However, faith does mean being open to persuasion by a God who will give you the ability to believe.

So what do I, at this stage of the Gospel Harvest, take away from this example of Sarah’s faith? Brethren, not all of us struggle with disbelief. I personally, just by nature, am not one that has doubts. But I do know various brethren who to themselves wonder if they are following truth or have fooled themselves into following something that is not real. For those with a skeptical turn of mind it is impossible in this day to not be confronted with this mental Giant. As brethren, it is our privilege to acknowledge this battle and encourage our brethren who are fighting it. We encourage them that the Lord WILL give them reasons to believe if they pray, “Lord I believe, help thou my unbelief.”

In our next example of faith we return to Abraham. Let us read verses 17-19 of Hebrews 11. “By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, That in Isaac shall thy seed be called: Accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure.”

In order to fully grasp the point of this example, the author of Hebrews reiterates two things that the audience has already been shown. The first, is that Abraham “received” the promises. Is there something more here for us to understand? Well the word “receive” has the meaning of “gladly accepted.” So in the background of our minds we are to remember that Abraham EMBRACED the promises. He lived in FULL accordance with them.

Next we are told to keep in mind the “specialness” of Isaac. We are to realize all that Isaac embodies. How does the author of Hebrews convey this to his audience? He does this by correcting and at the same time expanding the account in Genesis 22:1-15, specifically verse 2. Remember the audience has read the account of the binding and offering of Isaac. And they are familiar with this account, in the words of the Greek translation called the Septuagint. When WE read Genesis 22:2, we are reading an English translation of the Hebrew Masoretic Text. There Isaac is described as, “your ONLY son.” “Only” is the Hebrew word “yachid.”

So we ask ourselves, was Isaac Abraham’s only son? No, he was not. Ishmael is always described as a son of Abraham. He never lost that status. Well, the writers of the Septuagint were translating the Hebrew text into Greek and they asked themselves the same question and came up with the same answer. So how were they going to translate the word “only?” We know words develop additional meanings as time as goes on. And this word “yachid,” took on the meaning of, if it is the only one, then it is “what is most dear.” And so the translators of the Septuagint emphasized this shade of meaning and used the greek word, “agapetos” which in English is “beloved.” So to the audience listening to this sermon for the first time they are expecting Isaac to be described as the “beloved son.”

But the author of Hebrews did NOT use the word “agapetos” “beloved” when he wrote this sermon. He used a totally different Greek word, the word “monogenesis” meaning “only-begotten.” Did the author of Hebrews forgot about Ishmael? I would answer, no he did not. **Instead he is inviting his audience to begin to think figuratively.** We are not to look at Isaac from the literal standpoint of human reality, but from the figurative standpoint of God’s reality. We see this different reality all the way back in Genesis 17:18. There God has just told Abraham that Sarah in her old age would bear a son. And Abraham says unto God, “O that Ishmael might live before thee.” Let us stop for a moment and think about what that phrase implies? It implies that from God’s standpoint Ishmael does not exist. But doesn’t God in the next verse say that he has blessed Ishmael and will make him a great nation? Yes it does. How do we understand then this dichotomy? The only way to make sense of this is to realize that Ishmael does not exist IN RESPECT TO the promise. FIGURATIVELY he does not exist from God’s standpoint, but in human reality he was alive. This way of viewing the scriptures and these

mental associations in the background of our minds, are critical to our understanding of this faith example.

Let us turn then to the beginning of verse 17 in Hebrews 11. Here we read that it was on account of Abraham's faith that he offered up Isaac. Let us stop here and ask ourselves, did Abraham offer up Isaac? The verb offered, is, in the Greek, in the perfect tense; meaning an action that is completed. Let us contrast that with the same verb "offered" at the end of verse 17 which is in a different tense in the Greek. There it is in the imperfect tense; meaning an incomplete or progressive past action. The ESV makes clear this difference. It reads, "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." The author of Hebrews is again presenting a dichotomy. From God's figurative reality Isaac WAS offered up in sacrifice by Abraham. While at the same time from the literal human reality, Isaac was only IN THE PROCESS of being sacrificed by Abraham.

The question naturally occurs, where did the writer of Hebrews get this thought? First of all, we notice that the author correlates the offering of Isaac to the point in time of his testing. He says, "WHEN he was tested, offered up Isaac." So we ask ourselves at what point was Abraham undergoing a test? Turning to Genesis 22:1 we are told that Abraham's testing began at the beginning of the experience. The very first part of the test was, would Abraham respond to God's call. And Abraham passed the test saying, "Here I am." Abraham is then told what is being asked of him, which is, to sacrifice Isaac. All the preparations that follow are done with the knowledge that they are signalling Abraham's agreement to the sacrifice required. We notice there are no protestations from Abraham about what God has asked. There are even no questions from Abraham about what God has asked. Let us remember, Abraham FELT free to try to negotiate a place for Ishamel in chapter 17:18. Abraham FELT free to try to negotiate the destruction of Sodom in chapter 18:23. But in Chapter 22, Abraham does NOT feel free to negotiate, protest or question. Throughout the account we see nothing but mute acceptance of the ordeal.

Why does the thought of MUTE acceptance come to mind? Looking at the account in Genesis 22 we see subtle details in the narrative that paint a picture for us. When Abraham and Isaac have been walking for 3 days, Abraham tells the servants to wait while they go on ahead. Abraham puts the wood on Isaac's back and he then picks up the container of fire in one hand and the knife in the other. We are then told in verse 6 "and they went both of them together." At the end of verse 8 we read again this phrase, "and they went both of them together." What breaks into this action of "both of them going together?" It is speech. Isaac breaks this going together to ask a question. I see the fire, I see the wood, but where is the Lamb? Abraham answers, "My son,...God will see to it." And then they went both of them together. The picture painted is a silent journey. Each weighted down with the knowledge of what is to come. Putting ourselves in Abraham's shoes during this journey, was he not replaying over in his mind the building of the altar, the laying of the wood, the binding of his son, the raising of the knife, the sacrifice completed, the burning of what remained? He continued to go forward because

his mind did not shy away from the actions required. How many times did Abraham sacrifice Isaac in his mind?

We know that God sent an angel to stay the hand of Abraham. But from God's standpoint how was the offering of Isaac described? Was it in the perfect tense or the imperfect tense? It was in the completed, perfect tense. As we read in verse 16, "because you HAVE DONE this thing and NOT WITHHELD thy son." From God's figurative reality the sacrifice of Isaac had been accomplished.

Brethren this is a pivotal point in the scriptures. This is where God begins to deal with his people in a spiritual sense. This is where God begins to ask his people to look not at the letter but at the spirit. This is where God begins to ask his people to look at those things which are not seen. This is where God begins to ask his people to try to FIND the true reality and meaning behind his dealings with them.

With this in mind, let us turn to verse 19 of Hebrews 11. There we are told that during his testing, during his journey to the place of sacrifice, Abraham accounted, considered or reasoned that God was able to raise Isaac from the dead. How, we ask, was the author of Hebrews EVER able to divine that Abraham saw the resurrection of the dead? Well, we know that Abraham absolutely believed that Isaac was going to be the promised seed. And in order to fulfil that promise he would have to have children. He would have to be alive for that to take place. We also know that Abraham absolutely believed that he would accomplish the sacrifice and killing of Isaac. Somehow those two contradictory absolutely held beliefs BOTH had to be true. If God were to raise Isaac from the dead they both could be.

So we ask, is there any place in the account of Genesis 22 that could give us an idea that that is what Abraham was thinking? I believe there is an indication that this is what was in Abraham's mind. If we turn to Genesis 22, verse 5 we read from the Septuagint, "And Abraham said to his servants, Sit ye here with the ass, and I and the lad will proceed thus far, and having worshipped WE WILL RETURN to you." This tells us that Abraham absolutely expected to come back with a living breathing son. If we look in our bibles based on the Masoretic text we will see the same thought. The three verbs in verse 5 are plural. Both of them would "come again."

I imagine that when Abraham first heard his name called, he had already decided to do whatever was asked of him. After all had not the LORD fulfilled every promise he had spoken? But when understood what was being asked of him, he was stunned. The enormity of the command filled his mind and he could not even think, he just had the faith to obey. But during the preparation and journey he began to remember that God had invited them to reason upon him. So he does. He knows the God he serves fulfils his promises. He knows the God he serves is not arbitrary but faithful. He knows that nothing is too hard for the God he serves. And so Abraham is left with no other option BUT to expand his mind. His mind tries to incorporate the greatness of his God into what is being asked of him. And IN RESPONSE God gives him the mental vision of the concept of the resurrection.

Not only us, but the brethren listening to this sermon for the first time, understood as Abraham never could have, the whys and hows of our Lord's death and resurrection, purchase of the world of mankind and his subsequent call to awaken all out of the sleep of death. We cannot know how much Abraham grasped, but it was enough for our Lord to say in John 8:56, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it and was glad." The author of Hebrews wanted those discouraged brethren to draw the obvious parallel between Abraham's testing and their own trial of faith. For all that he endured he was blessed with a deeper concept of God's plan. Could they do any less for what they had been given?

So what did the author of Hebrews want these discouraged brethren to take away from this example of Abraham's faith? I will suggest the following: Faith believes that sacrifice and sufferings are a NECESSARY vehicle to larger concepts of God. It is WITHIN the struggles that we are led to a higher spiritual level. We must be willing to be thus led.

So what do I, at this stage of the Gospel Harvest, take away from this example of Abraham's faith? What strikes me the most is Abraham's response to this ordeal. Brethren we know that before us lies the collapse of the old order. We know it will not go down quietly. We know that a great deception is predicted that if possible would deceive even the very elect. All accept a few will believe it is TRUTH. We don't know what form it will take. But we do know that it will involve some great mental struggle. Contradictions between human reality and the reality of God will be presented to us. I pray that the example of Abraham will be brought to our minds at that time. That like Abraham we will mutely accept the way of the Lord. That like Abraham we will cling to the character of God as we know it to be. That like Abraham we will wait to be led into a higher knowledge of the God we serve.

Brethren, the discouraged condition of this community of brethren in the early stages of the church is not unfamiliar to us. The waning years of the harvest present their own challenges. The message of Hebrews speaks to us as much as it did our earlier brethren. And so we will close today with the words of the author of Hebrews, "Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompense of reward."