

GOD'S FRIEND ABRAHAM

True Blue: Faith Under Fire

“A Journey Through James”

Sermon 9

Texts: James 2:21-24; Heb 11:1-2,6; 8-10; 17-19

James 2:21–25 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.

Hebrews 11:1–2, 6 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ² For by it the people of old received their commendation. ⁶ And **without faith it is impossible to please him,** for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

Hebrews 11:8–10 (Gen 12:1-3; Rev 21-22) By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹ By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

Hebrews 11:17–19 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.

Nehemiah 9:7–8 You are the LORD, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham. ⁸ **You found his heart faithful before you,** and made with him the covenant to give to his offspring the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Girgashite. **And you have kept your promise, for you are righteous.**

Introduction:

In the Middle Ages, Coventry, England was a village famous for producing a particular blue cloth made with dye that would not run or fade with washing – it remained “fast” or “true.” By 1670 the blue dye produced in Coventry was so well-known it became the basis of the proverbial expression – “to be “true blue.” To be “true blue” was to be the kind of person who would be constant and loyal without wavering from their principles. Over time, the phrase “*true blue*” came to mean *unswerving loyalty, unwavering devotion, and unfailing commitment* to a belief, a position, or a person.

James has been talking to us about the mission God has called us to as first fruits of His new creation and representatives of His kingdom – developing and displaying a living faith to a dying world in ways that are acceptable to God and credible to others (James 1:26-27). James has taught us that this kind of faith must display whole-hearted, single-focused, fully trusting faithfulness to God and to His Word.

He has reminded us that this faith is produced in our hearts by the Spirit who helped us to understand and believe the “Word of Truth” (1:18). It is developed as we remain faithful in testing by relying on the wisdom God gives from above (1:2-7). It is displayed through loyal devotion to God when faced by temptation (1:13-18). It is quick to hear and obey the Word of God (1:19-25), and it consistently strives to love God and serve others in ways that please God and are useful to others (1:26-27).

The kind of faith James has in mind is not marked by deformed serving that advances self (2:1-13). In other words, this kind of faith does not show up with a towel and a basin to impress others with the image of servanthood or to make a point. It doesn’t serve selectively or for selfish ends masked by a towel and a basin for washing only certain feet under certain conditions or when seen by certain eyes. The kind of faith James describes does what others won’t, it serves without partiality and without any selfish agenda to receive something in return (significance, position, recognition, material gain, etc.).

The kind of faith James has in mind is not a “word-only dead faith” but a living, vibrant faith out which flows faithful, obedient, grace-enabled works marking a life of loving devotion to God and to others (2:14-26). In other words, the kind of faith James has in mind is “true blue!” ***It is marked by unswerving loyalty, unwavering devotion, and unfailing commitment to God and to His Word regardless of the price tag!***

And to help us see what this kind of whole-hearted, single-focused, fully trusting faith looks like in daily life, James introduces us to five friends of God (Abraham, Rahab, the prophets, Job, and Elijah).

Each of these friends of God had to renounce friendship with the world of their day in order to fully align themselves with God, His purposes, and His people – there was no room for a divided heart or double mindedness (James 1:6-7)!

Abraham left his entire former way of life in Ur; **Rahab** aligned herself with a foreign nation that was about to destroy her own people and her city; **the prophets** aligned themselves with the Word and Will of God; **Job** aligned himself with God in the darkest, most painful moments of his life; and **Elijah** exhorted a nation that was “limping” and “wandering” between serving the true God and the gods of Jezebel to align themselves fully with God or with Baal (cf. 5:19).

Each of these friends of God came to a defining moment where they had to declare their personal allegiance to God and stand alone against the world of their day. Each of them endured severe testing and faced strong temptation. And by the enabling grace of God, each of these friends remained true blue to the whole-hearted, single-focused, fully-trusting faith God planted in their heart and asked them to live out in their lives.

Which brings us to several important questions we must answer about how a whole-hearted, single-focused, fully-trusting faith is formed in our heart and expressed in our lives – and the best place to find those answers is to explore what faith looked like in the life of God’s friend, Abraham.

And to understand his faith, we will need to explore his story from four main places in our Bibles: James 2; Hebrews 6; Hebrews 11; and Genesis 12-22.

I. What is the Nature of a Living Faith – *What is it and how is it obtained?*

Hebrews 11:1 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.

Over a century ago a Dutch theologian named Herman Bavinck wrote a small book on the topic of faith that shook the established Dutch Reformed Church out of its religious stupor. In the introduction, he made this observation:

“There is no more important question than the one concerning the ground of our faith, the certainty of our salvation, the rootedness of our hope in eternal life. What good is knowledge, power, fame and honor if we cannot answer the question about our only comfort . . . **In order to live comfortably and die happily, we need certainty about the invisible and eternal things above.** . . . We must know how we can be liberated from the accusations of our conscience and from the weight of sin. We must know that God is and that He is **our** God. We must be sure we are reconciled to Him and can therefore approach death and judgment without terror.” (The Certainty of Faith, pp 10-13)

Bavinck was right – there is nothing more important than understanding what living faith is and knowing we possess it!

Living faith is more than believing the right set of facts (though it is not less). Being mentally convinced certain facts are true is not enough to motivate a man to live his whole life in pursuit of those truths, much less die for them. We won't die for a faith we don't live for!

Illustration: *Faith has many martyrs in her ranks; science but a few. **Jonathan Kepler** (1571-1630) was a famous astronomer who reluctantly and pragmatically practiced astrology counter to his convictions to make a living. He excused this by observing that the needy mother (astronomy) would have to live off the foolish daughter (astrology). When brought before the Inquisition, **Galileo** (1564-1642) recanted his scientific convictions about the Copernican system (the sun as the center of the solar system and not the earth) three times because his fear of execution was greater than his love for science. Who wants to die for the proposition that the earth turns? **BUT** multiplied thousands have willingly suffered extreme torture and even death because they were convinced about the faith they possessed! (What is Certainty?, p. 29.)*

A. *What is the nature of the living faith that Abraham possessed?*

- The writer of Hebrews answers that question when he states that *faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen* (Heb 11:1).
- What he means by describing faith as “*the assurance of things hoped for*” is that a living faith is ***convinced that the things we confidently expect to receive from God are real***. Another way of saying this is that faith is fully confident in the present reality of the things we expect from God.
- And what he means by the phrase “*the conviction of things not seen*” is simply that ***we are fully convinced that those things we are waiting to receive from God are present realities in a realm we can’t see with our human eyes and God will give them to us***.

Faith is full confidence in the present reality of things God has done, said, or promised that we cannot yet see or have not yet received in this realm. It is the convinced assurance in this present realm of the reality of unseen things that God has told us exist in His Heavenly realm that belong to us (cf Eph 1:3).

Illustration: We are fully convinced and confident that God will save us from His wrath on the day we appear before His throne in the realm we cannot yet see with our eyes – and therefore, we treat that salvation as a present reality that shapes our entire life in this realm.

- We could say it this way: Faith is **the unshakable belief in the reality of unseen things that shapes our present behavior on the basis of our future expectation from God**.

B. *If faith is an unshakable belief in the reality of things we can’t see in this realm or at this present time, where does this kind of faith come from? What is its source?*

- The only source for this kind of unshakable faith is the word of a living God who never lies and always keeps His promise!

- *This is what the writer of Hebrews meant when he said, “For when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear by no one greater, **He swore by himself**, saying, ‘I will surely bless you and I will surely multiply you.’ . . . In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us!” (Hebrews 6:13-18)*
- The foundation of a faithful faith is the word of a God who always keeps his promises. ***Whatever He says about anything, faith eagerly receives and confidently believes.***
- And the writer of Hebrews points out we have already done this once in our lives – we believe God made something out of nothing when, by the sheer power of His Word He created the visible universe out of nothing. And we believe it because He told us He did so in His Word (Heb 11:2)
- So – where does faith come from? ***It was sourced in our response to God’s Word.*** Paul said it this way, “*Faith comes by hearing and hearing comes through the Word of Christ*” (Rom 10:17).
- In other words, faith is believing God when he speaks, and that kind of belief only comes when Christ opens our eyes so that we are convinced that God is real and that He rewards those that seek him sincerely and diligently (Heb 11:6; 2 Cor 4:3-6).
- And that is where faith started in Abraham’s heart – God called Abraham through His Word! Listen to the very first thing Moses tells us about the beginning of Abraham’s friendship with God – “*Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country, and your kindred, and your father’s how to the land that I will show you.”*” (Gen 12:1).
- When God spoke to Abraham, he did not know God, nor did he worship or believe in Him. Abraham was a pagan idolater who worshiped and bowed down to the idols of Ur (Josh 24:2). But when God’s Word came to him, God granted him the faith to believe and we know this because the next thing read is, “*So Abraham went, as the Lord had told him.*” (Gen 12:4)

- Abraham’s faith came as a Spirit-generated response to God’s Word which is the same “Word of Truth” that brought us forth by faith! (Jam 1:18)

II. Why is a Living Faith Necessary – *Why do I need to ensure I have it?*

*Hebrews 11:2, 6 ²For by it the people of old received their commendation. ⁶And **without faith it is impossible to please him**, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.*

A. Because Approval from God Comes Only By Living Faith (11:2)

For by it the people of old received their commendation

- Faith is living in ways that demonstrate you believe the things you hope to receive from God are real and truly will come to you.
- Faith in what you have not yet seen or received orients your life in this present world and to the visible things surrounding you.
- And people with this kind of faith are willing to give up everything in this realm for things that exist in a heavenly realm no one else can see – based solely on their conviction that God's word is true (Heb 11:13)!
- And when those people give up everything that matters in this realm for things that matter in God’s realm, God is not ashamed to be known as their God (Heb 11:16)!
- By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise where he lived in tents as a foreigner (Heb 11:8-10).
- And he did all of this because he was looking forward to a city that has foundations, whose designer and maker is God (11:10).
- Abraham lived in the massive city-kingdom of Ur. Ur had existed for 1000 years before Abraham’s time. It was surpassed in size, wealth, strength, and prestige only by the city of Babel (Babylon). According to Rabbinic tradition, Abraham’s father, Terah was a high-ranking official in the royal court and a well-respected, extremely wealthy member of Ur’s nobility. For 70 years, Abraham lived and moved in the highest social levels of one of the greatest, wealthiest, and strongest cities in the world of his day. And one day, he left all of it to head out for an unknown land that a God he did not know promised to give him. And in that land, that unknown God promised to give to Abraham a

city-kingdom whose wealth, strength, and prestige would be greater and last longer than even a city like Ur.

- And on the promise of the Word of this God alone, Abraham went to that land and spent the rest of his life dwelling in tents waiting for the city God had promised him – a city no one else had seen! However, he saw that city from a distance (Heb 11:13), and because he was so convinced of the realness of this city, he refused to go back to Ur even though he had opportunity because he believed that the city-kingdom that existed in heaven was far better and well worth waiting for! (Heb 11:14-15)
- And so, as Abraham journeyed to some of the greatest cities in the world of his day and found himself in the court of some of the most powerful and wealthiest rulers of those cities – he kept moving and, unlike Lot, he stuck with his tents because he was looking for a better city that he had seen with the eyes of faith and was unmovable convinced would one day exist on earth. And because of his living faith, God was pleased to be called Abraham’s God! And in fact, that is how God consistently identified himself for the rest of Scripture – as the God of Abraham, and his son Isaac, and his grandson, Jacob!
- And when you and I exercise this kind of faith – God is not ashamed to be known as our God!

B. Because Pleasing God is impossible without Living Faith (11:6)

And without faith it is impossible to please him

- Hebrews 11 is filled with the stories of everyday people who believed God and manifested their belief in a whole-hearted, single-focused, fully trusting faith. Beginning in Genesis 4 with Abel and going right through the entire Old Testament Hebrews 11 describes simple, ordinary people whose faith was faithful even to the point of giving up their lives on the basis of the conviction that God would keep His word – and they gained His approval through their faith (11:39).
- Right in the middle of this amazing list of people, the writer of Hebrews makes this stunning statement – without whole-hearted, single-focused, fully-trusting faith it is ***impossible*** to please God.

- No matter how orthodox our creed, or how pious our religious deeds – if we do not have the kind of faithful faith displayed by Abraham and our spiritual ancestors listed here, we cannot please God and we will not receive His approval regardless of any earthly approval we have managed to gain.

C. Because Dwelling in the Presence of God Comes only by Faith

for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him

- If a person truly desires to draw near to God – to come into His presence now or for eternity, that person, like Abraham, must be convinced of two massive realities:
 1. He must be unshakably convinced that God exists – Abraham believed **in** God (Gen 15:6).
 2. He must be thoroughly convinced that God will keep His Word because He is a rewarder of those who seek him diligently and sincerely. Because Abraham believed that the God who spoke to him was real, when he arrived in the land God sent him to, he built an altar and called upon His name – he prayed to God (Gen 12:8). He worshiped and served God.

III. How is a Living Faith Expressed – *What does it look like?*

Hebrews 11:8–10 (Gen 12:1-3; Rev 21-22) By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹ By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

- ***It looks like believing God without reservation*** – Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance.
- ***It looks like following God without faltering*** – And he went out, not knowing where was going.
- ***It looks like being faithful to God (being loyal to him) without wavering*** – Abraham went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents.

- ***It looks like living for God's coming Kingdom without doubting*** – Abraham was willing to give up everything he had in this life including the security and comforts afforded in the little kingdoms of this because he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God!

IV. How is a Living Faith Developed – *How does it grow and mature?*

Hebrews 11:17–19 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.

- How does a living faith develop in our hearts? The same way that it grew in Abraham's heart – ***through ongoing day-by-day faith-generated obedience.***
- The story of Abraham's faithful faith is bracketed by two specific stories of God calling Abraham to embark on two costly faith journeys. In Genesis 12:1-3 God told him to sacrifice all that he had in Ur and journey to a foreign land where he would spend his life as a tent-dweller. In Genesis 22, God called Abraham to take another journey to sacrifice the promised Son through whom all the rest of God's promises to Abraham would come.
- More than 60 years exist between these two stories – for six decades, the faith that God granted Abraham in Ur had been growing and maturing as he learned who God is and what He is like.
- ***Abraham's faith was faithful in spite of the cost*** – whether leaving the comforts of Ur or sacrificing the hopes and expectations associated with Isaac, the son of promise, he obeyed.
- ***Abraham's faith was faithful in spite of disappointment and betrayal*** as seen in the story of Lot choosing the better portion (Gen 13).
- ***Abraham's faith was faithful in the face of his own repeated sinful failures*** when, because of fear, he lied and put Sarah in moral danger.
- ***Abraham's faith was faithful even when Divine delay*** made it humanly impossible for Sarah and him to conceive a son.
- And finally, ***Abraham's faith was faithful when God asked for the unthinkable*** – the sacrifice of this beloved son!

- How did Abraham's faith mature to this point? He followed God for 60 years and as he followed, he grew in his knowledge of God and in his confidence in His faithfulness to His Word.
- Abraham's faith began when he first believed God in Ur, and his faith grew as he continued to believe God no matter how dark the day or how hard the way – Abraham kept believing God. In other words, his faith was faithful!
- And the faith by which Abraham obtained righteousness from God (Gen 15:6) was the very faith that enabled and energized Abraham to live and act righteously before God and men.
- That is how our faith grows and matures – as we endure testing. If we fail a temptation, we do what Abraham did – we return to God, repent, and renew our commitment to follow Him faithfully.
- And as our faith grows and matures, it enables and energizes righteous living in the dark days and hard ways of our own lives.

V. How is a Living Faith Confirmed and Affirmed?

Nehemiah 9:7–8 You are the LORD, the God who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and gave him the name Abraham. ⁸ **You found his heart faithful before you,** and made with him the covenant to give to his offspring the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Jebusite, and the Girgashite. **And you have kept your promise, for you are righteous.**

- Twenty-five years after Abraham first believed in and followed after God, God kept his word and gave Abraham and Sarah the son he had promised! This was a big deal – for through this particular son, all the rest of the promises of God were destined to come.
- Not only had God given Abraham the long-awaited son, He had abundantly blessed him in every way. So much so that one might wonder if the blessings were the reason for Abraham's faith.
- So, in order to confirm and affirm the sincerity and devotion, God determined to test Abraham's heart to see if his faith really was whole-hearted (Does he love me with all of his heart and mind and sole?); single-focused (Why does he really worship and serve me?); and fully-trusting (will he follow me when the way is hard and the path is dark?)
- Abraham did not waver in his belief that God could and would keep His promise through the son he was about to sacrifice (Heb 11:17-19). He went to the mountain, bound Isaac, and raised the sacrificial knife.

- Abraham reckoned things about God – that God would be righteous and would keep His word even if it meant raising Isaac from the dead. And God reckoned things about Abraham – He tested Abraham’s faith and found his heart faithful before God (Neh 9:8).

Conclusion: *which brings us to a final question –*

What is the Result of a Living Faith – What is its reward?

James 2:23 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.

Hebrews 6:13–15 For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself,¹⁴ saying, “Surely I will bless you and multiply you.”¹⁵ And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise.

So, how was a lifetime of this kind of faithful faith rewarded? What did Abraham’s faith obtain from God? This is an especially important question given the observation made in Hebrews 11:39 where we are told, “*And all these did not receive what was promised....*” So, if they did not receive the promise in this life, what did their faith obtain for them?

A. He was granted friendship with God (James 2:23)

“He was called a friend of God”

- Because he aligned with God, God aligned with him!
- When Abraham believed God, he left his old alliances and fully aligned Himself with God. We must not think of “friendship” the way we think of it in our social-media shaped world. Friendship meant whole-hearted loyalty and devotion to another.
- It must have been a stunning thing to Abraham’s peers to see him renounce all his former loyalties to the gods of Ur, to the king and nobility of Ur, and even to his own family – for all of this was involved in the ancient concept of friendship – in order to align himself with an unknown God who promised him things in an unknown land.
- But when Abraham aligned himself as God’s friend, the Almighty God and Creator of all of Heaven and Earth aligned Himself and became Abraham’s friend! Abraham could not have had a better friend in His day!

B. He was abundantly blessed by God in this realm (Heb 6:14)

“Surely I will bless you and multiply you.”

- ***Material Prosperity:*** Everywhere Abraham went, God moved on the heart of the rulers and kings he interacted with to give Abraham great material wealth (Pharaoh, Gen 12:16; Abimelech, Gen 20:14-16) to the point that Gen 13:2 makes this observation, “Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold.”
- ***Multiplied Posterity:*** God repeatedly told Abraham that his descendants would number more than the stars he could count in the heavens (Gen 15:5; 22:15; 26:4; Ex 32:13). To an old man well-past the ability to father a child, this promise may have seemed as impossible to fulfill as to count the stars. And yet, God did fulfill this promise – Abraham did father a son (Isaac) and through Isaac, a nation numbering in the millions so that in Dt. 1:10, Moses said, *“The Lord your God has multiplied you, and behold, you are this day like the stars of heaven in number!”*

C. He obtained the promises of God in the realm to come (Heb 11:15)

And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise.

- For more than a thousand years, Ur of the Chaldees stood as a testimony to what human ingenuity, might, and strength could build.
- But during Abraham’s lifetime, an army from the kingdom of the Elamites conquered Ur’s army, deposed Ur’s king, and burned the city to the ground. Abraham’s father, Terah escaped with his family to the city of Haran. And Abraham spent the rest of his life looking for a better and more stable city than Ur! A city whose designer and builder is better than those who designed and built the biggest and strongest cities on earth like Babylon, Nineveh, and Ur.
- Abraham waited his entire life for that city – because he knew it existed in the realm where God dwelt. During his life, he was introduced to a strange and powerful priest-king named Melchizedek who ruled over a small city called “Salem” (Gen 14:18-20).
- And 1000 years after Abraham lived, one of his descendants ruled over that city and from that city he governed an entire nation. That descendant was David and his city was Jerusalem. This was version 1.0 of the city Abraham saw whose builder and maker is God.

- And one day, another of Abraham's descendants – a son of David and a priest in Melchizedek's order will establish a new and better version of Jerusalem (version 2.0) whose foundations and walls are so majestic they almost defy human comprehension (Rev 21-22) and from this glorious city, He will rule the earth!
- And what is more, Abraham will be as well known and as highly honored in this glorious city as he was in the little and long-forgotten city of Ur. More than that – He will rule with Christ from that City. And even more than that – so will all his spiritual descendants who are counted righteous before God because they have done what Abraham did – they believed God and He counted it to them as righteousness!
- This is the reward of a whole-hearted, single-focused, fully-trusting faith in God! It is Abraham's reward – dwelling with God in a glorious, eternal city that will never fall because the ancient enemy of God has been defeated and the ancient curse has been reversed – for all who simply believe and align themselves fully with God!
- However, choosing that city-kingdom means we don't choose to align ourselves with the city-kingdoms of this present evil age!
- There was another individual who left Ur with Abraham and joined him on his search for the city whose builder and maker was God – Lot.
- Lot heard the same promises, worshiped at the same altars, experienced the same blessings and protections, and witnessed Abraham's faithful faith as he waited for God's city. BUT – somewhere along the way, Lot got tired of waiting for a city no one had ever seen. He stopped believing in the promises of a God no one had ever seen. And one day, he saw a city – a beautiful city filled with all the things he had left behind in Ur – but it was also filled with wickedness in the sight of God.
- One morning, standing next to Abraham on a well-watered plain filled with livestock and wealth, Lot made a choice that would cost him everything – his wife, his family, his wealth, his heritage.
- He chose the wrong city and it cost him everything except his soul!
- Why did that happen? Because his faith did not persevere! May his story not be our story!