

- e. Abraham's offering of Isaac is the final example the Hebrews writer provided of his faith (11:17-19). Like the previous two, this circumstance was grounded in God's covenant promises, underscoring again that faith is directed toward the God who has spoken, not one's own imaginings or expectations. So it was with Abel, Enoch and Noah, and so it was with Abraham: He believed God for what He'd pledged to him as a matter of covenant grant, and at the center of those covenant promises was the promise of a covenant heir. This was the premise of the land inheritance (11:8-9; Genesis 13:14-15, 15:18-21), but also of the episode mentioned here. And as the pledge of an heir was the focal point of God's covenant with Abraham, *so it was the focal point of his faith*. Abraham believed God for all that He'd promised him, but the fulfillment of all of those promises depended on him having an heir. This is why the Genesis account mentions Abraham's faith only in relation to this particular promise (15:1-6). It wasn't that his faith was limited to it, but the promise of an heir was the foundation for everything else God pledged. When Abraham believed God for an heir from his own body, he was believing Him for everything that flowed from that outcome.

God's covenant with Abraham utterly depended on an heir, and this meant that the fate of God's creation depended on this individual. For God's covenant with Abraham stood on the foundation of His pledge in Eden; His intent in "electing" Abraham was that he should be His instrument for restoring the world to Himself: "*In you (and in your seed) all the families of the earth will be blessed.*" The reason this is so important is that it provides the proper context for considering the episode of Isaac's sacrifice on Mount Moriah and how it attested Abraham's faith. (Note that James cited this episode as evidence for his thesis that faith without works is dead (James 2:20-26). Abraham's offering of Isaac, as Rahab's protection of Israel's spies, demonstrates how it is that faith *works*.)

It's also important to note that the Hebrews writer followed the Genesis account in treating this episode as God's *test* of Abraham's faith (cf. 11:17; Genesis 22:1), *but in a crucial respect that is often missed*: God didn't devise this test so that He could see whether Abraham would "obey" by doing what he was told; rather, His intent was that this test would require Abraham to grapple with and manifest his faith in a supreme challenge to it, and not for God's sake, but his own. As a result, he would be absolutely certain of and firmly established in his election and vocation as God's covenant instrument for His renewing purpose for the world.

Isaac was the heir God pledged to Abraham, the offspring in whom all of His covenant promises were bound up, and therefore the unique person who embodied God's veracity and faithfulness. Isaac was God's proof that He is faithful and true, and that Abraham could be assured of the inheritance promised to him. Isaac's conception and birth reinforced Abraham's assurance, but it ultimately depended on the boy growing up and having his own children. For God promised Abraham that he would be the father, not of one child, but of a *great nation*. If Isaac, then, was indeed the promised heir, it followed that he himself was appointed to be the father of a vast multitude of descendants.

This is why Abraham's offering of Isaac was the preeminent expression of his faith, as well as the greatest proof of it. The Hebrews writer didn't explain all of this, but as a Jew, he undoubtedly understood these truths and assumed them in his statements, evident in the way he constructed them. The first thing that stands out is his grammatical shift when speaking about the sacrificial act itself. Most English versions don't capture the nuance of this shift, but it's clear in the original Greek, which can be rendered as follows: *Being tested, Abraham – the one who had received the promises, having offered up Isaac by faith, came to the point of offering up the only-begotten.* The writer employed the same verb twice ("offer up," referring to a sacrificial offering), which makes the statement somewhat awkward, but his conspicuous shift in grammar indicates his reason for doing so. He was underscoring the fact that Abraham's act of taking his knife to slay his son was simply the expression of the work of faith that was already in place. Having believed God and His word to him, Abraham had, in principle, *already* offered up his son long before he laid him on the altar. That final act was simply the climax of Abraham's enacted faith (Genesis 22:1-4). He had given over the covenant heir to his covenant God long before he arrived at Mount Moriah. Yes, God stopped Abraham from slaying Isaac at the last moment, but that didn't alter the fact of Abraham's obedient faith; in his own mind and heart, he was fully engaged in this act of worship.

A second thing to note is the way the writer depicted Abraham and Isaac. He described Abraham as "having received the promises," and Isaac as the "only-begotten." This is significant, for it highlights the *covenant* relationship between Abraham and Isaac; more than simply father and son, Isaac was the covenant heir, and so the focal point of God's covenant promises to Abraham. Isaac was the "only-begotten" son, not in the sense that he was Abraham's only son (he wasn't), or even that he was Sarah's son, but that he was the *unique* son – the child God promised to Abraham and Sarah; the one child appointed to inherit the covenant and its promises (Genesis 17:15-21; note that the apostle John used the same term for Jesus – John 1:14-18, 3:16-18; 1 John 4:9). The promise of a covenant heir was absolutely crucial to the covenant's integrity, continuance and fulfillment; without such an heir, Abraham would never be the *father* the covenant pledged, no matter how many children he happened to conceive.

*And so, when Abraham determined to do what God asked him, he wasn't merely committing to the unthinkable act of killing his own child; he was agreeing to an act that would slay the covenant itself. Sacrificing Isaac would prove that God Himself is unfaithful and untrustworthy, for He had commanded an act that contradicted His covenant and its promises and would actually destroy them.*

God's directive to slay Isaac was a test of Abraham's *faith*, not of His compliance. The challenge to Abraham wasn't whether he would obey a divine command and kill his precious son, but whether he would continue to believe that God is true and faithful when He Himself called that into question. *Could he believe God for the promises when He commanded that they be put to death?*

God's dual word to Abraham – Isaac's status as *monogenes* and the command to *sacrifice him* – set up an impossibility that showed Him to be false and untrustworthy on one count or the other; both “words” couldn't be true. If God was serious about sacrificing Isaac, then he couldn't be the covenant heir; on the other hand, if he was the heir, then he couldn't die. The writer underscored this dynamic by noting explicitly that Isaac *was* the elect offspring through whom Abraham would become the father of a multitude of descendents (v. 18) – a fact that Abraham knew full well (ref. again Genesis 17:18-21). The integrity of the covenant was bound up in Isaac as the *monogenes*, but as God ordained him to be the father of the “seed” promised to Abraham. But having issued this oath, the covenant God was now calling for Isaac's death, while as yet he had no children.

The challenge to Abraham was the challenge of faith – to believe that God is true in the face of impossibility. To pass the test, Abraham had to believe God for both of His “words”: that Isaac was indeed the covenant heir, and that God intended him to be slain as a sacrifice of worship. The Hebrews writer explained how Abraham reasoned this out: *He reasoned that God is able to raise the dead* (v. 19). Hadn't He effectively done this when He brought forth a child from two dead bodies (v. 11)? Isaac was living proof that God brings life out of death. And if He did this miraculous work once when Isaac was conceived and born into the world, could He not do it again by raising him from the dead? The Genesis account shows that this was Abraham's thinking (22:4-8), and that account was evidently the source of the Hebrews writer's insight. Abraham's faith in his God meant that he would not hesitate to slay his son, and so *worship* God as He directed. But this same faith assured him that he would receive his son back; the God who'd pronounced Isaac the *monogenes* would provide the sacrifice He demanded. And so Abraham was fully convinced that his God would indeed prove faithful. By His own power and wisdom, He'd resolve the impossibility He created.

God did provide a different sacrifice (Genesis 22:13-14), and the writer explained that Abraham received Isaac back “in a figure.” This expression points to the fact that Isaac wasn't literally raised from the dead, and yet he *was* brought back from death in the sense that Abraham had already sacrificed him in his own mind and determination. When God stayed his hand, Abraham received back the son he'd delivered over to death. This much is clear, but there is also some suggestion that the Hebrews writer viewed this circumstance *typologically* as well as figuratively. That is, he saw in this “resurrection” of the covenant heir out of sacrificial death a prefiguration of the same phenomenon involving the ultimate heir of whom Isaac was the prototype (Galatians 3:16). Could this be what Jesus had in mind when He insisted that Abraham saw His day and rejoiced (John 8:56)?

Most important here, though, is that this episode was the climactic demonstration of Abraham's faith, and God rewarded it with His affirmation that He would indeed uphold and fulfill His covenant with him. Most notably, God advanced the promise of global blessing from Abraham to his “seed” (Genesis 22:15-18). His intent for the world would be realized through resurrection of the covenant heir.