

How can we know our faith is real

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Preacher: Nick Louw

[0:00] Well, nobody likes taking tests, right? I remember when I was at varsity, our final year of varsity exams at UCT, we had it in that big sports hall.

And there were just hundreds and hundreds of desks and students there and the invigilators walking up and down like concentration camp guards. And it doesn't take long, you look around and you start to see the students who obviously realize they didn't study enough, just staring blankly at their pages.

Some of them starting to cry. You know, it's nobody's idea of a fun afternoon, taking exams or tests. I'm sure you can relate. I'm sure you remember studying for tests at school.

No matter how much prep you've done, no matter how good a student you were, you always feel nervous, don't you, before taking a test? Wondering whether you've done enough, wondering whether there'll be some curveballs that you're not ready for.

And I'm sure we all think school would have been great, it would have been fine if it just wasn't for all the tests and exams, right? Nobody likes taking tests. And yet the truth is, tests are necessary in life to see whether we have inside us what we claim to have.

[1:15] I'm sure you wouldn't want your doctor performing surgery on you unless the medical knowledge he claims to have has been tested in some way, right? In the same way, I'm pretty sure you wouldn't want to drive over a bridge unless engineers have gone there and tested whether the bridge has the structural integrity that the builders claim it has.

Tests, tests, we might not like them, but they're necessary for life, to have certainty and confidence that the thing claimed is actually real.

well it turns out the same is true of the Christian life the Christian the member of God's saving covenant is called to faith in God's promises in order to receive God's promises of salvation and eternal life in the new creation we are called in the Bible to trust and believe in God's promises and that's it just to believe it is often quite a strange thought when people hear it for the first time what you mean so we don't have to do anything we've just got to believe well yes it seems too simple but we can't do anything to make up for our sins we can't do anything to undo our sins against God that we've already committed and we've got to trust that Jesus has done it all that's the heart of Christian faith and faith is therefore what we have to bring to the table just believe in God's promises it seems too simple that all we've got to do is believe except the question we need to ask is what does it really mean to believe if that's all we've got to do if faith is the central part of the Christian life then what is faith actually what does it really mean to believe and how do we know how do we really know that our faith is genuine and we're not just going through the motions and saying we believe as some kind of insurance policy you often get cultural Christians who say they believe and on a certain level they even believe that they believe because that's what everyone else does but how do we know that our faith is real genuine saving faith there's lots of people today who claim to be Christians they've been baptized they come to church they stand up they recite the Apostles Creed they say they believe but they don't really so how do we know that faith is genuine well that is where testing comes in to prove that the faith we claim to have inside us is actually the real thing well in today's story we read probably the most famous test of faith in the Bible the test that God gave to Abraham now Abraham was a man in covenant with God you'll know if you've been with us so far in Genesis someone who God had promised to bless and give an eternal future and nothing was going to stop God from doing that even Abraham's own mistakes we saw last week Abraham's only responsibility in the whole thing was to believe to have faith in God's promises and that's how covenants work with God God makes a covenant he makes promises to a particular personal group of people and he calls them to believe it and that's it but the question is what did it actually mean for Abraham to really believe what what did this covenant faith actually

look like in practice how do we know it was real faith well that's what this story is here to show us and from it you'll I want you to see three things we learn about the nature of true covenant faith so that each of us can go away and evaluate our own faith that we claim to have to check that it's the real thing that's what we're going to do this morning so the first lesson we learn about covenant faith is that it is tested when we have to choose between blessings already given and blessings still to come so God sees fit to bless us with many gifts you might not feel blessed right now but the fact that your heart is beating you're breathing God's air is proof that he he wants you to live he wants you to stay alive and more than that there are many other blessings that he gives us as he sees fit homes and cars and relationships relationships arguably are some of the most important blessings God gives us and yet often we read in the story of the Bible that often he calls his people to give up some of these things that the things that make us happy here and now in order to obey him and obey his call for our lives and it's it's in those times we we get to see whether we really believe that God still wants to bless us when he actually calls us to give up certain blessings then we actually have to ask ourselves does he still you know he's calling me to give up this blessing does he still want to bless me or has he changed his mind and that's the situation Abraham found himself in Isaac was a great blessing to him a great blessing the greatest blessing he'd ever received even more so than the seven million rand equivalent that Abimelech gave him last week this son of his was everything to him God describes him at the beginning as your only son the son you love we know that Abraham was hugely attached to Isaac but not just because he was his son but furthermore because Isaac as we've seen last chapter Genesis 21 Isaac was the miracle son that was born miraculously whom God said he'd bring blessings to Abraham and his family through so the idea was that God's all of God's blessings were actually going to come through Isaac so there was no more precious blessing that than Abraham owned than his son Isaac but then what we see in the story and it kind of hits you like a ton of bricks as you're reading along this is very unexpected God puts Abraham in an almost impossible predicament and tells him to get rid of his greatest blessing that he's given him to kill his son and so Abraham found himself in a situation where he had to choose between this great blessing God had already given him and obeying God in faith that he's still going to bless Abraham even if Isaac dies now before we continue I think it's worth mentioning this doesn't mean that God endorses child sacrifice so the children can breathe a sigh of relief because spoiler alert God doesn't actually let him kill his son at the end but this test had to happen to confirm that Abraham's faith in God's promises to bless him in the future was actually real that he wasn't just going through the motions and what better way to test that than by seeing whether he's willing to give up the greatest blessing God had given him to date and yet that's how true covenant faith is tested and strengthened because true covenant faith is trusting in God so much that we'll be willing to give up the blessings he's already given us and Christians will often face those kind of choices not to the extent Abraham had to but in many different ways we'll be put in situations where we need to choose between holding on to the material blessings that God has given us now or giving them up to obey him and do his work more than you think more than you expect we'll be put in those situations as his covenant people that is how he tests and strengthens our faith and that is the kind of faith that Jesus expects of his disciples you read his words in the gospels he says to them don't worry about money and clothes seek first the kingdom of God and these other things will be given to you in God's time and when he warns them that following him is going to mean giving up a lot of stuff comforts and material blessings and even close relationships

[9 : 46] Jesus assures them don't worry everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life that's the outlook and the expectation Jesus have has of his disciples today still I once played a trick on my kids that I saw on the internet it's pretty cool you take three cups face down then you lift up one of the cups and put 20 rand in it and then you put it back down and they know which cup has the 20 rand and then you shuffle them around but slowly enough that they can keep track of the cup that's got 20 rand in it and you say to them if you choose the cup you can have the money inside if you choose the right cup so you shuffle them around but slowly enough and they're following this cup and then you say okay choose one and they choose the cup and you lift it up and you go oh you found it 20 rand and they're very happy with themselves of course until you lift the other two cups to reveal the 200 rand in each of them it's a cool trick but it's also a lesson that we can easily lose out on the greater blessings God wants to give us if we fixate so much on the smaller ones that we can already see

Jesus made this point a lot in in how he taught on you just see his teaching on money and how material possessions in this life can keep us from entering God's kingdom you know the camel and the eye of the needle harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God all these things that Jesus taught about money he's making the point that we can lose out on the greater blessings God has in store for us if we fixate on the smaller ones he's given us now but of course the difference between the cup trick and God is that God doesn't hide the much greater blessings he tells us about them that he wants to give us he tells us what he wants new life in a restored creation with no sickness and death and suffering he want he made us to live and not to die and he tells us that in the bible and he wants us to enjoy all the great blessings that he has in store for us if only we stop fixating on the smaller immediate blessings of this life well true faith is such that we can stop fixating on the immediate blessings of this life as Paul says is we can stop fixing our eyes on what is seen and we can fix our eyes on what is yet unseen that is the the characteristic of true faith true faith is tested when we're in situations where we have to choose between the two but there's more to the story than meets the eye there's another lesson to learn here because there's a whole other level at which Abraham is being tested here which teaches us something more about true covenant faith the second lesson which is that covenant faith is believing in God's provision to make his promises possible now let me explain what I mean you see in this story

Abraham wasn't just being asked to give up a present blessing for the sake of a future blessing in this case he also had to give up the very thing which was going to make future blessing possible you see Isaac God had promised that his plan to undo the curse and bring blessing back into this world and restore creation and defeat sin and death would happen through Isaac's line and so if Isaac dies that can't happen so it's one thing being asked to give up immediate blessings it's a totally another thing to be asked to give up the means of future blessings that God has promised do you see the extent of this test and yet twice in this story Abraham shows that he believes God will still make a way for God's promises to come to pass irrespective of God asking him to sacrifice Isaac and if that means Isaac needs to survive the sacrifice then God will make a way for him to survive even if Abraham doesn't know how you can see this in how he talks in verse 5 have a look in your Bibles verse 5 when they reach the mountain it's amazing how the story starts to slow down and get more kind of serious as building up to that climax of the peak of the mountain when they reach the mountain they've had a few servants with them and he said to his servants verse 5 stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there now look at the words he uses we will worship and then we will come back to you very confident Abraham and then on the way up we've got this heart-wrenching scene as they're walking up

Abraham and Isaac just then up the mountain Isaac spoke up to his father verse 7 father yes my son Abraham replied the fire and the wood are here Isaac said but where is the lamb for the burnt offering Abraham answered God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering my son and the two of them went on together now I'm pretty sure Abraham didn't know how God was going to make this happen make it possible how God was going to solve this predicament but as we read his words it seems he knew somehow that Isaac would survive even if God raised him from the dead in fact if we turn to the New Testament Hebrews tells us this in Hebrews 11 17 I'll read it by faith Abraham when God tested him offered Isaac as a sacrifice he who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son even though God had said to him it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned

Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death and so you see Abraham knew out of faith somehow God would provide a way for Isaac to live and for his covenant promises to be fulfilled but what he didn't know is how God would use a substitute to achieve that how he would provide something else to die in the place of Isaac this ram that is caught in the thicket and that's the unexpected twist in the story I think if we're Christians and we've been going to church for a period of time and we've heard this story maybe in Sunday school we're used to it we don't actually see that there's something very unexpected that happens that God provides this ram because think about it God could have just said okay Abraham stop you've proved your faith well done you can go now but he doesn't he provides him with another sacrifice in place of Isaac why?

[17 : 13] well because God is wanting to teach Abraham and us a very important lesson foundational to the rest of the Bible story and that is that for his covenant promises of blessings to be possible for Abraham's children for them to keep living a substitute needs to be made for their life because they don't actually deserve God's covenant blessings we don't actually deserve God's

covenant blessings the Bible says the wages of sin is death we've sinned against God we've ignored God and the world he's made we've turned our back on him knowingly and unknowingly we deserve death that is why we will die we don't deserve life again neither did any of Abraham's children and so God is saying listen for these future blessings to come to pass for people of the covenant I need to provide you with a substitute for your life and then as we read on in the Old Testament and the New Testament it turns out

God keeps making this point he keeps bringing this idea home that his people need to trust that he will provide a substitute for their lives if they are to live in the land and enjoy his covenant blessings so you look in the Passover that happens hundreds of years later when God does a very similar thing that he's doing with Abraham he threatens to take the life of the firstborn son of every home in Egypt including the Israelites and he sends his angel of death to take those lives it's very chilling but then he also provides them with a substitute his covenant people not the Egyptians but his covenant people get a chance to have a substitute a lamb die in the place of the firstborn son so that the son can live and the family can escape Egypt and go to the promised land substitute you see so that God's people can enjoy God's blessings in the future we see it again after that in the custom of redeeming the firstborn of every Israelite family

I don't know if you know but the Israelites when there was a child born a firstborn they would have to redeem the child they would have to buy the child back from God they would have to sacrifice an animal to purchase the life of their child and that was again God put that in place to remind them every household of his covenant people every person needs a substitute for their life if they're going to go on to enjoy God's covenant blessings we see it also in the sacrificial system that God sets up in Israel once they enter the land where he provides a way for their sins to regularly be atoned for by a substitute sacrificial animals so that his people could keep living in the land oh and by the way the place that this happened centuries later the temple in Jerusalem the center of sacrifice and substitution for God's people it was built on a hill previously known as Mount Moriah the very same place

Abraham and Isaac were told to go in this story read 2 Chronicles chapter 3 if you doubt that when Solomon actually built the temple he selects the hill of Moriah and he names it but think about it of all the mountains God could have chosen to test Abraham he sends them to the place that will later become the epicenter of the Jewish sacrificial system coincidence I think not you see the point is ever since this test of Abraham the idea of a substitute and that we need a substitute if we're going to continue to live on and enjoy God's future blessings in a new creation that idea of a substitute has been ingrained in the Israelite faith this belief that the reason they could live and receive God's blessings at all was because God would provide a substitute for his people just like he did for Isaac and so by the time

Jesus comes on the scene we can understand just what he had come to do that's why we need the Old Testament that's why we can't just start reading the Bible from the New Testament because we really get to understand what Jesus came to do and what it means for us when we understand all these things that God already set up and taught us in passages like this one we can now understand what Jesus had come to do he had come to continue what God has always been doing which is providing a substitute for the life of his people so that they can receive God's future blessings but not just the Jews Jesus made it possible for people from all over the world who trust in him to be saved from their sins to have a substitute for their life so that they could be resurrected and go on living in God's new world and of course that substitute was himself dying on the cross in place of sinners and by doing it in Jerusalem the very same place a substitute was provided for Isaac and by doing it during the Passover weekend when people remembered the substitute [22 : 47] God had provided to free his people from slavery Jesus was making it quite clear what he had come to do what all those things were pointing towards he had come to be the substitute in our place to allow us to keep on living so that we can go on to inherit God's promises one day and all we've got to do is believe that you see we as Christians are called to have the same faith that Abraham had faith that God will fulfill his promises to us not because we deserve it but because he provides a substitute for us that is part of what faith in Jesus really means I mean many people say I believe in Jesus we go out our outreach team and we go out and we talk to people and we talk about Jesus yeah yeah I believe in Jesus you get it a lot but all they mean actually is I believe he existed but that's not what faith in Jesus that saves us actually means it's not enough just to believe

Jesus existed faith in Jesus that we are called to as his covenant people means much more than just believing that he existed it means believing first of all that he's your king but also that he's your substitute and by him dying you are able to live and that is the only reason you are able to live in the world to come and that is true covenant faith that saves us knowing and trusting in God's provision of a substitute for our lives that's the heart of Christian faith and that is actually what leads us to live out a life patterned on Jesus and what he did because there's a final third lesson that we learn in the story about what covenant faith looks like and that is that covenant faith expresses itself in sacrificial actions covenant faith expresses itself in sacrificial actions so let me explain

I wonder if you noticed in the story the point at which Abraham's faith was proven to be true well it was in verse 10 wasn't it have a look in your Bibles right at the top of this mountain right at the climax of the story after he had done everything then he reached out his hand it's amazing like you would think by the time he's tied up Isaac he's going okay God come on really look what I've done I have faith in you but even he went further he took the knife reached out his hand took the knife to slay his son and it was pretty much as it was going down the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven Abraham Abraham and he's going here I am do not lay a hand on the boy do not do anything to him now I know that you fear God because you have not withheld from me your only son but did you notice God waited until he took the knife and held it it was at the very point Abraham reached out and took the knife that God called time out it's when he acted it's when he took a step in actually making that sacrifice that God confirmed that his faith was real and not before and so here we see the link between faith and action you know lots of people that I've spoken to think well you know if God saves whoever has faith then we can just have faith and live how we want right I don't know if you've ever heard that from people and that's there's people who think that people who think well if it's all just about believing then I'll just believe and still live the way I want for the things I want to live for except that doesn't work because what we've already seen faith is far more than just an intellectual exercise right faith in the Bible is not something that stays in your head true faith is seen in action true faith actually leads us to do things in our life in line with the word of God both his promises and his commands and particularly true faith is seen in us making sacrifices in fact if you compare the account of the fall in Eden we did it months ago Eve and Adam taking that fruit and then you compare it with Abraham here you see just as Eve's lack of faith in God's promises in Eden caused her to do something out of selfishness which was to reach out and take the fruit which led to her curse so Abraham's faith in God's promises caused him to actually do something sacrificially reach out and take the knife which led to his blessing and so his genuine faith was shown and was proved the faith that was essentially going to be the undoing of the fall was proved and shown to be true in sacrificial action do you see that do you see that say yes okay if you don't if you don't because it's so important you get this that genuine faith the way that you can know your faith is real is how willing you are to make sacrifices to obey God and the history of God's covenant people are filled with examples of sacrificial action that shows their faith is real when he calls

[28 : 31] Moses to forsake his place in the Egyptian palace to lead his people a bunch of slaves when he calls the Israelites to leave everything they know and enter into the wilderness where they don't even know if they'll have food when David shows his faith by sacrificially risking his life to fight Goliath in the name of Israel and God's people because he knows God's covenant promises to Israel when Daniel shows his faith by refusing to worship the Babylonian king no matter what it would cost him when the disciples show their faith by leaving their livelihood and forsaking everything eventually giving up their lives to proclaim the gospel when missionaries leave their homes and their career opportunities to share the gospel one of them I read about this week was a man named John Sung he was a Chinese man in the early 1920s and his father sent him to America for his education and he turned out to be a brilliant student earning a chemistry doctorate in only five years and he was so successful at academics he had a wealthy career ahead of him and yet before returning to China he realized he was called to minister the gospel to areas in Southeast Asia that so desperately needed it and so he was on that ship and was about to arrive in the Chinese harbor back home when he took his box of academic awards that he had worked so hard for over all those years the foundation of his future success and he tossed them overboard into the sea and because of that hundreds of thousands of Chinese became

Christians because of that sacrificial decision you see God does his work in this world through his covenant people making sacrificial decisions and taking sacrificial steps maybe not all as big as

Abraham or John Sung's but every day God calls you and me to little steps of faithful sacrifice in how we spend our time in how we spend our money in what priorities we pursue in our lives and in risking our reputation to speak the truth of Jesus in our world sacrificial actions that will cost us reaching out and taking the knife in obedience to God rather than reaching out and taking the fruit of our own selfish desires and we will have that choice daily Jesus says whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me for whoever wants to save their life will lose it but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it thing is though as we've seen in this story we'll only be willing to obey

Jesus command and lose our life essentially give up what we cling to in this world for his sake if we have real faith in God's covenant promises and only then we'll only be willing to sacrifice what we cling to for Jesus if we really believe that God's promises of resurrection and life and blessing to come in the new creation are certain and real and solid and so I wonder what God is prompting you to sacrifice in the coming weeks for Christ and his kingdom to show that your faith is the real thing let's pray Lord we do thank you for this foundational story that you've given us of Abraham we thank you for him and how he was willing to go through that to show us what true faith looks like and Lord we thank you that you have provided a substitute for our lives in the Lord

Jesus Christ who died for our sins I do pray for anyone here who is not submitted and trusted in Christ that they would just realize that there is no other way to escape your wrath for sin because you are a just God there is no other way than their penalty being paid and that's what Christ did on the cross and Lord I pray for covenant members believers in Christ followers of Christ here this morning I pray that you would help us all to be willing to make the sacrifices you call us to make Lord show us our faith is real and refine it and strengthen it for your glory we pray in Jesus name Amen