

Impossible

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

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.

Hebrews 11:8-12, 17-19 (NIV)

There's a song in the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical of Cinderella. The fairy godmother sings:

Impossible, for a plain yellow pumpkin
to become a golden carriage.
Impossible, for a plain country bumpkin
and a prince to join in marriage,
And four white mice will never be four white horses!
Such fol-der-ol and fid-dle-dy dee of course, is – Impossible!
But the world is full of zanies and fools
Who don't believe in sensible rules
And won't believe what sensible people say.
And because these daft and dewey-eyed dopes
keep building up impossible hopes,
Impossible things are happening every day.¹

Now, the fairy godmother, of course, had a magic wand that allowed every one of these things to become possible. Unfortunately, we don't have magic wands, or pumpkins that turn into

carriages, or mice that turn into horses – though we have plain country bumpkins joining princes in marriage (William and Kate, anyone?). When we're faced with the impossible, we don't get an easy way out, most of the time. Well, meet Abraham. When God called him to do impossible things, he trusted and obeyed. When God promised him impossible things, he had faith that God would be faithful and bring them about, even though they were impossible.

Remember Noah? Abram is his great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandson. Abram's father, Terah, had two other sons that are recorded in Scripture: Nahor and Haran. Haran dies, orphaning his son Lot, who Abram takes under his wing. Abram marries Sarai, but they have no children because Sarai is barren.

Abram (later Abraham) gets the biggest chunk of Hebrews 11. His faith and obedience when God tells him to do what seems impossible are excellent examples for us to follow. Three different situations in Abram's life are worthy to be mentioned in Hebrews 11, each of which we'll take a look at today.

Moving

When I was six years old, my family moved from Rhode Island to Ohio for my father's job. I'm not entirely sure what my parents were thinking, moving over six-hundred miles with a six year old, a three year old, and a newborn. But, they packed us all up into our newly-acquired mini-van, put all of our stuff into a big truck, and started driving. The truck with all of our stuff was supposed to arrive at our new house just after we did. But when the appointed day came, the truck – and our stuff – were nowhere in sight. The moving company assured us that it was just delayed by a day. And they gave us that same assurance every day for a week.

We couldn't afford to stay in a hotel as the saga dragged on, so we moved into the empty house that we were renting and slept on blankets on the floor. Eventually, the company admitted that they didn't know where the truck was. We later found out that the driver had abandoned the truck with all of our stuff in a crack neighborhood in Rhode Island – it had never left the state! A new driver had driven around town until he found the truck, had all of the locks cut, got a tow truck to pull the cab away from the trailer, hooked up his own truck, and headed to Ohio. But when our belongings arrived, there were missing items and thousands of dollars of damage. If you talk to anyone who has moved, there's a good chance that it didn't go smoothly. Now,

imagine packing up all your stuff on camels like Abram did, and not even knowing where you were going. Now that is an adventure in moving... and an amazing test of faith!

Today you hold the world at your fingertips – literally. If you have a smart phone, you can access the internet from anywhere. You don't have to go to a library to check out a book anymore – you can get it on your Kindle. You can video chat with anyone on any continent with Skype and FaceTime. If you have a Facebook profile, chances are that you have friends in other time zones and that speak other languages. And if you want to know anything, all you have to do is google it.

Back in Abraham's day, the desert wasn't littered with cell phone towers. Letters, if they were written, traveled by camel. Moving wasn't done by the two men in the truck, and if you moved across the desert, you left everything behind – family, friends, and anything you couldn't carry on your back (or on your camel's back). Moving wasn't easy. But when God told Abram to move, he did.

Read Genesis 12:1-9

God called Abram to leave his country and his people – everything he had ever known – and start over. Abram even left his father in Harran, who died about sixty years after he left.² Chances are good that Abram did not see his father again after he left. Abram packed up everything – his livestock, his people, his nephew, his wife, and his tents – and did as God commanded. Scripture doesn't record any hesitation on his part, but you can be sure that Abram had doubts and fears and reservations about going. And yet still, Abram obeyed, trusting that God was working out His plan, even though he couldn't understand it, trusting that God would keep His promise of making him into a great nation and giving the land of Canaan to his offspring.

If God called you to move (across the country or across the world), what reservations might you have? Would you go?

Children

Between Genesis 12 and Genesis 15, Abram fights off the Eastern kings, rescues all of the captives (including Lot) and still he doesn't have what God has promised. You would think that

if God promised to make Abram into a great nation and give the land of Canaan to his offspring, Abram would actually have offspring.

Read Genesis 15:1-6

Apparently, Abram was beginning to fear that God would not keep His promise. Abram even questions God, and receives another, more specific promise that he will have a son of his own flesh and blood. God reassures him that his offspring will indeed be numerous, making him into a great nation. And Abram believed.

Fast forward through Genesis 16, where Abram and Sarai take matters into their own hands and Abram sleeps with Sarai's maidservant, Hagar. Hagar has a child and names him Ishmael, but God still insists that there is another who will be of Abram's blood that will be make Abram the father of many nations.

Read Genesis 17:1-27

God's second covenant with Abram is so big that we can't even call him Abram anymore. God changed his name to Abraham, which means 'father of many.' Abraham doesn't just take God at His word, though. Like Mary when the angel tells her that she will bear a son (Luke 1:26-28), Abraham says, "How can this be? I'm old, and so is Sarah! I already have a son, Ishmael, though his mother is not Sarah."

God doesn't knock Abraham down to the ground and tell him to quit asking questions. God says, "Sarah will have a son, and he will be the inheritance of the covenant I am making with you. I will bless Ishmael, but with Isaac I will establish my covenant." He even gives Abraham a timeline –one year – in which this seemingly impossible thing will happen.

Now, if you've read the Hebrews 11 passage from the start of this chapter, you'll have seen that it isn't Abraham who is commended for his faith in the middle few verses. It's Sarah.

Read Hebrews 11:11-12

Yes, even Sarah was commended for her faith, for she "considered him faithful who had made the promise" (Hebrews 11:11, NIV). And indeed, if you read Genesis 21:1-7, Sarah does indeed have a son, Isaac, and Abraham continues to keep his covenant with God to faithfully walk in the way He has called him to.

God's promise to Abraham and Sarah seemed impossible. But Abraham's and Sarah's faith led to God enabling the impossible. Has God ever given you a promise that you thought it would be impossible to fulfill? What about this promise: "And we know that in all things God works for

the good of those who love him” (Romans 8:28, NIV)? It’s hard to believe that in ALL things God works for the GOOD of those who are called according to his purpose. What about when the roof collapses and a spouse loses a job and you don’t have money to put food on the table? Does your faith give you the foundation you need to believe that God will work even the most awful situations for good? There is a perverse and twisted theology that says God just wants us to be healthy and wealthy. But it isn’t born out by scripture, and it is often contradicted by experience. Christians and non-Christians around the world starve to death, get Ebola, are orphaned by AIDS and car accidents, and suffer from unemployment. God’s promise is not that we won’t suffer, but He DOES promise that – somehow – He will bring good out of all things for HIS purposes. Abraham and Sarah – just like you and me – sometimes have trouble believing that, and they – just like you and me – take matters into our own hands, which doesn’t usually work out too well.

Abraham and Sarah had doubts that God would fulfill His promise. They tried twisting his promise into justification for forcing a servant into sexual surrogacy. They lied about Abraham’s marital relationship with Sarah when Abraham feared that a powerful ruler might want her as his own concubine – TWICE. Sarah laughs at the prospect that she could have a child. Ironically, these unfaithful people were remembered as heroes of faith. It is as if God overlooked their unfaithfulness and focused on the occasional shining example of faith that they were. That gives me hope. Hope that in my unfaithfulness, He remembers my faithfulness.

Sacrifice

Read Genesis 22:1-2

Abraham and Sarah finally, after nearly 100 years, had a son. It’s not immediately evident how much time has passed between Genesis 21 and Genesis 22, but as we enter this part of Abraham’s story of faith, Isaac has grown up enough to carry wood and trek up a mountain with his father. God asked the impossible of Abraham when He told him to bring Isaac as a sacrificial offering. God had told Abraham that his son, Isaac, would inherit the covenant, and that he would be made into a great nation. God even calls Isaac by name in that promise. And now God tells Abraham to sacrifice this son, his beloved, only son.

What might Abraham have been thinking when God told him to sacrifice Isaac? What insight does the writer of Hebrews give us (hint: see Hebrews 11:17-19) into Abraham’s thoughts?

Even though God asked him to do the impossible, Abraham obeyed. Even though he was probably scared out of his mind, he still trekked up that mountain with his son as the intended sacrifice. Even though he probably had a million questions for God, he still obeyed, trusting that God would still be faithful.

Now, we need to offer an important caveat here. Every once in a while we read of a very ill person who thinks that God wants them to kill their child. It often happens in the midst of a deep psychotic depression when the person's reasoning abilities are compromised. That's not what's going on here. In fact, some Jewish teachers contend that God's test was to see if Abraham would refuse to be like the pagan's who offered child sacrifices. Hebrews doesn't fit well with this interpretation, but nonetheless, this story IS unsettling. And it should be. We need to struggle with it as we try to understand what God is doing.

Read Genesis 22:3-18

In a movie, this scene would go something like this: Abraham and Isaac trek up the mountain on a dark and stormy morning. Abraham doesn't speak much to his son on the way up – it seems he is lost in thought (or prayer). As they begin to build the altar, Isaac wonders where the animal is that they will sacrifice, and asks his father. “God will provide it,” Abraham answers. Abraham finished the altar and then bound his son's hands and feet as tears streamed down his face. “I'm sorry, my son. And then, God intervenes....

There is a painting of this scene by Caravaggio, a baroque master. You can see it here:

<http://www.caravaggio.org/the-sacrifice-of-isaac.jsp>

It is a terrifying picture. Isaac is terrified. Abraham is determined and anguished. The angel is in earnest to stop Abraham in the act of slitting his son's throat. And a ram looks on from the corner of the picture, unseen by Abraham or Isaac.

I cannot begin to imagine how impossible it must have seemed to Abraham that God could make good on His promise as he was trekking up that mountain. I cannot imagine how difficult it must have been to set his only son upon that altar. I cannot imagine what it was like to be Isaac.

(Interestingly, Isaac's faith story is shrouded in Scripture – we know much more about his father and his son!)

This story tears at us. And it should. But the author of Hebrews – writing to Jewish Christians – uses it as the ultimate example of the Abrahamic faith for Christians facing trials of their own. God told Abraham to do the impossible: to leave his home, his father, and his country for a land he did not know. God told him that he would have a child, and he waited – imperfectly and without perfect faith – for decades. And when the fulfillment of God's promise was fulfilled, he was told to sacrifice his son. Do I understand this story fully? No. But I do see the bigger point – God is working out His purposes despite our failures, working through the faith we have. And yet Abraham still did not see all that God had promised him. He did not see the full fulfillment of the covenants in his lifetime, but he remained firm in his faith that God would fulfill the impossible. And neither do we. Sometimes, we have to be content with the promise and the glimmer of its fulfillment, seeing the future only through a darkened window.

Abraham's faith prompted him to obedience in the face of the impossible. What seems impossible to you right now? Maybe God is calling you to step out in faith and move to some far off place. Maybe He is calling you to step out of your front door and enter the lives of your next-door neighbor. Maybe He is prompting you to reconcile with a friend you had a falling out with years ago. Maybe He is prompting you to get out of bed today, because that seems impossible. Whatever you're called to do, with whatever little faith you have, God is with you, and just like with Abraham, His purposes will be accomplished even if you can't see it right now.

¹ Rodgers and Hammerstein, *Cinderella*

² New Bible Commentary; edited by GJ Wenham, JA Motyer, DA Carson, and RT France. IVP Academic, 2010.