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## FAITH'S TESTING AND WARFARE

### *Hebrews 11:17 – 12:2*

In this chapter we continue our study of what faith is, and of how it behaves; in a word, what it means to be a believer.

#### **The testing and refining of faith**

##### **a. Faith justified by works (11:17-19)**

True faith must and will be tested. It is not enough to say, 'I believe.' Sooner or later we shall be called upon to justify our profession of faith by our works. Abraham was; and we have already considered what the issues at stake were, and what it was that had to be demonstrated, and to whom it had to be demonstrated, when Abraham was asked to offer up Isaac to God (see pp. 89-90).

What interests us here is to discover how his faith found the strength to go through this extreme test so triumphantly. It found it in logic. I don't suppose for one moment that Abraham ran up the mountain singing and shouting 'Hallelujah!' It was not exuberant spirits or waves of emotion that sustained him in his grim task. It was logic. Abraham reasoned the matter out. God had not only promised that he would have many descendants. God had specified that it was through Isaac that these descendants would come. Isaac as yet had no children. He was not even married. If God was now asking that Isaac be slain, that could not mean that God was going back on his promise. There was only one way out. God would have to raise him from the dead. He could; and he would. So presently Abraham told his servants to stay put: he and Isaac were going to the mountain-top to worship and both of them would come back again (Gn. 22:5).

The logic was simple but breathtaking. It was also sound; and God was delighted to honour it, and to make the giving back of Isaac from virtual death a prototype of our Lord's death and resurrection (11:19).

Faith's logic does not reason that if God loves us he must save us from difficulty, disease, sacrifice and death. It argues rather, 'I am persuaded that neither life nor death can separate us from the love of God or from the fulfilment of his promises.'

##### **b. Faith redirected (11:20)**

It may seem to us rather generous to attribute Isaac's blessing of his sons to faith; for when we read the actual story in Genesis 27, his faith seems in many respects to be misdirected. God is generous, of course. He will detect true faith where we might find it difficult to see it. On the other hand the writer is not exaggerating or flattering Isaac when he says that he blessed his sons by faith. Isaac's blessing of his sons shows clearly that he did believe the great promises in regard to the future given to Abraham and to his seed; and it was in a real

faith-response to those promises that he blessed Isaac and Esau even concerning things to come.

His mistake was to confuse God's blessing with the emotions and sensations that sometimes accompany or result from that blessing. He had (or at least his wife had; and surely she had told him?) a word from God that of the two nations which would spring from his sons, the elder would serve the younger (Gn. 25:23). That was of course contrary to natural feeling. But instead of putting natural feeling aside and acting on the basis of faith in God's word, Isaac determined to give the official patriarchal blessing to Esau and not to Jacob. Perhaps he had simply forgotten God's word (though Rebekah had not); or perhaps he disregarded it. Rebekah, with scarcely more faith in God than Isaac had, decided to deceive him into blessing Jacob and not Esau. It was easily done.

Isaac had sent Esau off to hunt, kill and prepare some venison for him to eat, so that in that feeling of well-being and contentment which steals over one after a good meal, he might feel assured of God's blessing and pass it on to Esau. But while Esau was gone, Rebekah dressed Jacob up in goatskins and sent him in to Isaac with a dish of roast goat which she had faked to taste like venison. Now Isaac was nearly blind, so he could not see who it was; but when Jacob spoke, he immediately recognized the voice. Unfortunately – or fortunately, depending on how you look at it – he did not trust his hearing but allowed himself to be deceived into thinking it was Esau's voice. He tasted the meat and felt sure it was venison. But it wasn't; his taste had deceived him. He touched Jacob's arms and felt sure it was hairy Esau. But it wasn't: his sense of touch had deceived him. He smelt Jacob's clothes and was convinced they were Esau's, carrying the scent of a field which the Lord had blessed (Gn. 27:27). But they weren't: the sense of smell had deceived him.

What a sorry scene it was, with Isaac neglecting God's word and trusting his natural preferences, feelings and sensations, and with Rebekah deliberately playing on his feelings in order to by-pass his intellect and moral judgment in the decision he was making, and all in the cause of promoting the blessing of God! We may be sure that God approved neither of the one nor of the other.

Mercifully God overruled it. He recognized that beneath it all there was a core of genuine faith, and he honoured that faith, though it took him years to discipline out of Jacob's life the effects of that day's deception.

We too need the lesson. It is a common error to mistake the emotions, feelings and sensations that sometimes accompany or result from God's blessing with the blessing itself. Some new Christians so enjoy the feelings of relief and elation that accompany their initial forgiveness, that before they realize what they are doing they rest their assurance of salvation on these feelings instead of pinning it to faith in God's Word. The result is that when the feelings subside, their assurance evaporates.

Some religious leaders, instead of producing conviction and faith by preaching God's Word and allowing emotion and feeling to follow, start the other way round. They try to work up emotion and feeling as if they were in themselves the blessing of God. Some do worse. They try to get 'decisions for Christ' by bypassing people's intellects and moral judgments and moving them by their emotions and feelings.

And all of us, I suggest, from time to time go chasing spiritual 'highs' rather than learning to live by faith in God's Word. We mistake feeling good for becoming holy.

And God is merciful and patient with us too. He recognizes the genuine faith that lies underneath and gives us credit for it. But just as patiently and firmly he will redirect it to its proper object.

### **c. Faith refined (11:21)**

As with Isaac, so with Jacob. The act of faith that is singled out for mention is taken from the end of his life. Of course he had believed in God's promised blessing right from the beginning of his career. But in his early years and for many years thereafter there was a great deal of dross mixed in with the pure gold of his faith. He had very small ideas of the blessing which God designed to give him and very crude ideas as to how that blessing was to be obtained. He thought it was clever, and good business, to take advantage of Esau's moral weakness and offer him an abominably low price for the birthright, and later on to steal the blessing from him by downright lies and deceit (Gn. 25:28-34). He ruined his relationship with his father-in-law and the rest of the family by using Laban's capital selfishly to feather his own nest. Worse still, he thought the result was the blessing of God on him (Gn. 31).

But God had to disabuse him of these ideas. He made him give Esau 220 goats, 220 sheep, 30 female camels with their young, 40 cows, 10 bulls, 20 female donkeys and 10 male donkeys (Gn. 32:13-15). That at least made it clear that God's blessing of Jacob did not depend on cheating Esau.

Rachel, Jacob's favourite wife, who stole her father's gods and deliberately deceived him (Gn. 31:30-37), died prematurely (Gn. 35:16-20). Joseph, his favourite son, Rachel's first child, went missing, presumably killed. Simeon was imprisoned way down in Egypt. In his distress Jacob vowed he would never let Benjamin, Rachel's only other child, out of his sight. But eventually he was forced to do so. A third of his family plus his favourite wife were now gone, and famine stared him in the face. So this is what all his scheming, cheating, and ruthless business deals had accomplished!

What about God's blessing now? That remained what God had always intended it should be. And when Jacob had been taught that all his scheming contributed nothing to the obtaining of the blessing, God let him discover what that blessing was. He found that Joseph was still alive, and, as head of the whole Egyptian economy, was second only to the Pharaoh. Joseph, his son, had become the economic saviour not only of Egypt but of all the smaller nations dependent on her. God's original promise, 'All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring' (Gn. 28:14), had found its first major fulfilment. As Joseph's father, Jacob blessed the Pharaoh (Gn. 47:7).

It was with a much purified faith that Jacob, when he was dying, blessed Joseph's two sons. He had been rigorously chastened by God's discipline no longer to trust to his own selfish schemings; yet now he was overwhelmed by the grace of God whose blessing had already proved to be far more than he had ever asked or thought; and he leant on his staff, like the true believing pilgrim he was, and worshipped God. He could bless his grandsons in faith: their future was secure in the promise of God.

### **d. Faith undimmed (11:22)**

Perhaps the greatest test of faith is not sacrifice but success, worldly success. If so, Joseph's faith was supremely triumphant. We may be sure that throughout his long and eventually brilliant career, he had maintained his personal faith in God and his daily spiritual exercises. But it is not his personal piety that the Holy Spirit calls attention to. Many believers in similarly eminent positions in the world have, behind the scenes, maintained an equally strong personal piety. And that is splendid. But the remarkable thing about Joseph is that being in the position he was in, he still retained his boyhood faith that God had a prophetic programme for this world and that that programme was centred in, and would be carried by, Israel and not Egypt.

At the time such a faith must have seemed to the hard-headed politicians, economists and businessmen of the world rather eccentric, not to say bizarre. Egypt in those days was the dominant world power. Israel was a tiny tribe, scarcely more than an extended family. For a member of that family to emigrate to Egypt and eventually to become the Vice President of the country was not all that remarkable. Such things have often happened in the history of super-powers. They still do in some quarters. But for such a Vice-President, while still in office, to believe and announce that hope for the world's future lies not with super-powers, but with tiny Israel and with her God-given prophetic role in history – that is quite another thing. It takes a lot of faith to believe that nowadays. It must have taken a lot more in Joseph's day.

Yet that is what he had learnt from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and he continued to believe it. He lived in a day when there was an interlude in God's programme for Israel, and Israel was out of the promised land and living among the Gentiles. During that interlude Joseph was happy to serve in Egypt's administration. But he believed the promise given to Abraham (Gn. 15:13-16). The interlude would one day end, Israel would return to the land. God's prophetic programme would be on the march again.

When that happened, Joseph wanted to be identified with it. His bones were not to be left in Egypt to await the general resurrection at the Last Day. Even in death he wanted to be remembered not as a famous prime minister of Egypt, but as one link in the long chain of the fulfilment of God's purpose through Israel. In this, Scripture says, he acted in faith. That is, his action was based on the explicit word of God recorded in Genesis, interpreted literally, and believed whole-heartedly.

God give us the faith of Joseph to believe that before this planet comes to its end, there will be a time of unparalleled blessing for our world. The present interlude in Israel's history, marked by her unbelief in the Messiah and her scattering among the Gentile nations, will one day end. Her Messiah shall return. Israel shall be reconciled and restored. For the world at large it shall be veritable life from the dead (Rom. 11:12-15, 25-27).

## **Faith and the redemption of mankind**

The time eventually came for God's purposes for the redemption of Israel to swing into action. That gave believers in Israel spectacular opportunities to show that their faith was living and real, by co-operating with God and playing their part in his work. Moses was the prime example.

### **a. Faith's ambitions, choices and motivations (11:23-26)**

Moses' career as the evangelist to his people began with the faith of his parents. Their faith saw in him as a baby a potential deliverer of his nation. Risking their lives they hid him from the king's murdering soldiers, trusting God to find some way of preserving him when he could no longer be hidden. That's only natural, you say, for parents to want to protect their child and to have grand ambitions for him. Perhaps it is. But still today the career of evangelist or missionary is the greatest and most noble career known to man. Not every child can grow up to be a Moses; but God give us more men and women of faith whose prime ambition for their children is that they shall grow to be effective co-workers with God in the salvation of their fellow-men and women.

As the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter Moses grew up surrounded with every possible luxury and privilege. Almost any office in the state, short of being the Pharaoh himself,

would doubtless have been open to him. But he gave it all up, even renouncing his right to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. What made him do it?

According to the writer it was not hot-headed enthusiasm. It was the result of a considered weighing of the comparative value of things and a calm deliberate decision to go for the most valuable.

On the one side there were pleasures, the considerable pleasures of life at court with all the dignity and honours of royal society. On the other was positive ill-treatment if he threw in his lot with oppressed Israel. He chose the ill-treatment. Not because ill-treatment is a good thing in itself, or that pleasure is a bad thing in itself. But the pleasures of Egyptian court-life were sinful and temporary: a very poor deal at best. The ill-treatment was unattractive enough, but it was merely a temporary consequence of association with the people of God.

For Moses the expression 'people of God' was no empty religious phraseology. He really believed that Israel stood in a special relationship with the living God, with a unique role to play in the process of God's self-revelation and in his purposes for the redemption of the world. In Moses' opinion it made it the most noble and most exciting society it was possible to be associated with. The fact that most individual Israelites at the time were unpolished, unsophisticated, ill-treated slaves did nothing to detract from the dignity of being God's people. Compared with that, life in the Egyptian court was a poor-quality, ignoble thing.

Again, on one side lay treasures of wealth, and art and culture and advanced technology. No other nation at the time had such tremendous treasures. And they were, of course, genuine treasures of real value. On the other side lay reproach, the reproach of Christ. And it was real reproach too. A messianic movement is rarely popular or even respectable in the eyes of the establishment. Belief in the coming of a world Saviour? Denunciation of the present established order as at heart anti-God? Demands for radical repentance? Warnings of plagues if those demands were not met? The encouragement of a mass' exodus of the populace out of ordered civilized society into the desert? Moses challenged all Pharaoh's fundamental values. It is no wonder that Pharaoh responded with a mixture of dismay, incredulity, disgust, hatred and vitriolic abuse.

But for Moses this reproach was a wound suffered in the cause of the Christ. Such wounds were in themselves more honourable and valuable than all Egypt's treasures, not to speak of the reward they would bring in the day of Messiah's triumph.

### **b. Faith's spiritual warfare (11:27-37)**

Moses, of course, did not redeem Israel. God did that. But God used Moses to preach redemption to the people, to teach them how they could be redeemed and to lead them once they had been. And that required of Moses a very clear understanding of the principles of redemption, and faith strong enough to apply them and put them into action.

First there was the realism of tactics in face of the foe. The enemy was no man of straw. At the beginning, perhaps rashly, Moses had tried to settle an injustice by secretly killing an Egyptian who was ill-treating some Israelites. It became known, however, and Moses was afraid and fled from Pharaoh's presence to the land of Midian (Ex. 2:11-15). The writer explains that it was not fear of Pharaoh that made him flee. It was presumably a question of tactics. Had Moses stayed in Egypt at that point, he would have been obliged there and then to bring on a show-down between himself and Pharaoh. It would have been premature. The Israelites were not yet ready for that; witness their rejection of Moses (Ex. 2:14) and their later failure of nerve and hope (Ex. 5:19-21).

So Moses made a tactical withdrawal. But he persisted with his determination to deliver Israel. The opposition was all too powerful and very visible. But Moses' faith could see the One who is invisible – and he was Almighty.

Then Moses had the faith to believe that it was possible to be saved from the wrath of God and from the destroying angel. He believed he knew how. He not only encouraged the Israelites to shelter behind the blood of the passover lamb: he instituted the annual celebration of the passover as a yearly reminder to Israel of the principle of redemption.

He had to be right, for if he wasn't, there would have been a lot of firstborn dead in Israel.

One might ask, 'How is there anything remarkable about that? God had told Moses exactly and in detail how Israel would be saved from his wrath. Anybody would have believed it and acted on it.'

Really? God has told us also how we can be saved from his wrath and know we are (Rom. 5:9). But many preachers appear not to believe it. At least, they seldom preach it. On the one hand they seem not to be sure that there is such a thing as the wrath of God. They talk only in terms of his love. On the other, if there is such a thing as the wrath of God, they feel that no-one can be sure that he will be saved from it. Obviously they do not have Moses' faith. Somewhere along the line they have lost the courage to believe and preach what the Bible plainly teaches.

And then Moses had the faith to believe that if Israel would walk along the recently created channel of dry land through the Red Sea, the water would not flow back again until they got safely to the other side. With tremendous courage he persuaded Israel to take that step and commit themselves to the crossing. 'They were all baptised to Moses in the cloud and in the sea,' says Paul (1 Cor. 10:2).

You say, 'But where was his courage, if God had commanded it? Was it not easy for Moses to obey and get the people to obey?' Well, the New Testament commands believers nowadays to be baptized and clearly explains its significance. It has proved notoriously difficult for some to believe it and obey it, and still more difficult to preach it and require it.

The forces of evil were barricaded in Jericho. Joshua had the faith to believe that their defences could be breached. And they were. The tactics God told him to adopt seemed strange indeed. Perhaps the biggest act of faith was to believe that such tactics would work. But they did. We struggle against strongholds of a different kind (2 Cor. 10:3-6), not against enemies of flesh and blood, but against demonic forces (Eph. 6:10-20). But let us not lose our nerve or our faith in the gospel. Though foolishness to the world (1 Cor. 1:18), it is still the power of God to salvation. The enemy's walls can still be breached (2 Cor. 10:4).

When Jericho fell, Rahab was saved. But consider what faith in the true God and in the gospel involved for Rahab. It meant receiving the Israelite spies and transferring her loyalties from her native people to the invading Israelites whom she had come to believe were God's people. The people of Jericho would have regarded her as a traitor. But it is not treachery to leave the world's side and to stand with God and his people. 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation,' said Peter to his fellow-Jews on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:40). We must have the faith to take up the challenge and re-echo it in our modern evangelism.

### **c. Faith's victories and apparent defeats (11:32-12:2)**

And now the author summarizes in a very impressive and moving list the exploits of numerous men and women of faith. Some were obviously victorious by faith even in their life-times. Others, equally men and women of faith, suffered apparent defeat. They died

without being vindicated. Faith is not always seen to be triumphant in this life. And it takes greater faith to suffer apparent disaster, unvindicated, and to go on believing still.

Now all in the list of those who faced disaster through faith are nameless, except One. Of him we read in chapter 12. For when all the vast army of witnesses has gone past, there comes One at last who takes our attention away from all else and fastens it on himself. We look off to the author and perfecter of our faith. And what do we observe? A great success in this life, with people thronging round to praise him that his way has worked and has been vindicated and proved right? No. We follow the Man of faith to Golgotha's hill and see him trust God's leading and guidance till it brings him to the cross. We watch the nails driven in, and we say, 'Surely God will vindicate his faith now and work a miracle to bring him down.' The crowds pass by and say, 'He saved others, but he can't save himself. Let this Christ, this King of Israel, come down' (Mk. 15:32).

But he doesn't. The hours pass, and he dies. The world says, 'There you are. He was an impostor.'

What is there to prove otherwise? Why, the One who went to the cross is risen now, seated on the right hand of the throne of God. And he who once seemed such a victim of circumstances, sits on the right hand of the very throne that controls the universe. Courage! If you dare to believe this Christ and follow him, come what may, you too shall sit down on his throne, as he also overcame and sat down on his Father's throne. This is Christ's explicit promise (Rev. 3:21; 2 Tim. 2:12). Let us dare to believe it.

But to follow his faith we shall need to share his sense of values. He despised the shame and endured the cross for the sake of the joy set before him – not only the joy of his own exultation and glory, but the joy of having us there to see it and enjoy it with him eternally (Jn. 17:24). May God give us a true sense of values and help us to choose the best.

## Questions

- 1 Would you distinguish between the testing of faith and the refining of faith?
- 2 What is meant by talking of the logic of Abraham's faith (11:19)?
- 3 How reliable are our emotions and feelings as an indication (a) that we are saved, and (b) that we are enjoying God's blessing?
- 4 In what way does Joseph's request (11:22) demonstrate his faith?
- 5 Is it fair to say that our attitude to evangelism shows whether we are true believers or not? Consider Philippians 1:3-7.
- 6 How and in what sense did Moses, who lived centuries before the birth of Jesus, bear reproach for the sake of Christ (11:26)?
- 7 Analyse Moses' sense of values (11:24-26). If we shared his values, in what practical ways would they affect our lives and careers?
- 8 In the light of 11:35-38, would it be true to say that faith and obedience always lead to success and prosperity?
- 9 What will it mean to reign with Christ (2 Tim. 2:12)?