

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
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JAMES 1:2,3,12

“Consider it pure joy... whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance... Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love Him.”

ENCOURAGING WORDS FROM GOD’S WORD

(5) HOW TO PASS LIFE’S GREATEST TESTS

In this series of messages, we’re looking at the “Deadly D’s” — delay, doubt, defeat, discouragement and today we’re going to look at “difficulty.” And we’re going to study the life of Abraham, and the tests that he went through. Folks, I want to tell you — life is a series of tests. James says that the problems that come to us are actually tests; and in the life of Abraham we’re going to see four tests; and although your circumstances will vary, I’ll guarantee that God will test you in the exact same four areas in which He tested Abraham.

I think that those of us who have had long years of formal education have learned that it’s helpful to prepare for tests! Teachers, you know, are downright mean! They keep the exam questions hidden, and you enter the classroom, and there on your desk is a printed list of questions to be answered in three hours. And you’re inclined to panic for the first five minutes; and you say to yourself, “If only I could have known these questions in advance so that I could work out the answers, how much better I would perform -- indeed I could be assured of getting an A!”

Now that’s not the way God is -- God wants you to pass His tests! In fact, He wants you to pass them so much that He tells you in advance the way you’re going to be tested! You can count on it; you will be tested these four ways in life. He wants you to pass, so He tells you in advance. There is just one thing about God’s tests -- you don’t know the timing, and God specializes in pop quizzes! So, we’re going to look at Abraham and the tests he went through; and as we do, we’ll discover how genuine our own faith is as believers in Christ.

1. The first test is a MAJOR CHANGE. Look at Hebrews 11:8: “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.” Circle the word “where.” The first test of life, folks, is a major change. God asked Abraham to pick up everything he had and move to another place. And Abraham asked, “Where?” So, the first test is the “where” question.

“God, where am I going?”

And God says, “I’ll tell you; I’ll let you know.”

“How long is it going to take?”

“I’ll let you know.”

“How will I know when I get there?”

“I’ll let you know.”

Would you follow a God Who was as uncommunicative as that?

You see, this major change for Abraham was difficult. In the first place, he was 75 years old and he was ready to retire. God said, “You’re ready to aspire!” When he was ready for social security, God said, “You’re ready for social insecurity!” When he’s ready to hang it up, God says, “Take it down and dust it off!” When he’s ready to sit back and take it easy, God says, “You’re ready for the biggest adventure of your life!”

Not only that. He was wealthy, so he had a lot to move. He had camels and cattle and sheep. He had servants. He was a fat cat in the Mesopotamian city of Ur. How would you like to live in “Ur”? “Where do you live?” “Ur” — it sounds like you had gas on your stomach! “Where do you live?” “Well, Ur...!” And God said, “I want you to leave Ur and go to a place that you know nothing about. Just follow Me.” So, he picked up everything, and immediately, without question, he took off.

And here’s the first test of a real believer — a real believer will follow God’s leading without knowing “where.” Some of you are asking the “where” question right now. “Lord, where do You want me to work? Do You want me to make a job change?” “Lord, where do You want me to live?” “Lord, where do You want me to retire to?” “Where do You want me to go to college?” And these questions all presuppose a major change, and this is a test. God says, “Start moving and I will direct you.” But the direction seldom comes until you make the first move. You see, folks, if your faith hasn’t led you to take any risks, it’s surely not real faith.

So the first test is a major change — the “where” question.

2. The second test is a DELAYED PROMISE, and this test causes us to ask, “When, Lord?” Look at Hebrews 11:9-10: “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. There’s a word in these verses that is used twice, and it is the word “promise.” “Promise” is a very important word in the vocabulary of faith. And the question that always accompanies a promise is “When?”

God said, “I’m going to give you the promised land.” And Abraham wanted to know “When?” And that leads me to say this: God wants us to base our lives on promises, not explanations. God guaranteed Abraham the promised land, but after he got there, there was a delay. In fact, Abraham waited not only during his lifetime, but also during the lifetime of his

son Isaac, and his grandson Jacob -- and they were still living in tents! There's not much more of a temporary way to live than that! They couldn't even settle down. How would you like your family to live in a tent for three generations?

Can you imagine Sarah?! "Abraham, when are we going to get a real house?" said Sarah intently!! I don't know about you, but I can handle a test in life if I know there's going to be an end to it. But the hardest kinds of tests to handle are the tests in life where you don't know if they're ever going to end. A delayed promise is difficult to handle. But Abraham never gave up. He never went back to the security and the opulence of Ur. And here's the lesson - a real believer will wait for God's timing without knowing "when."

Some of you are going through the "when" test right now. "When am I going to get that job I'm seeking, Lord?" "When am I going to get married, Lord?" "When am I going to have a baby?" "When am I going to get well?" "Lord, when are You going to solve my problems? When are You going to save my husband, or my wife, or my child? When are You going to answer my prayers?" The second great test in life -- a delayed promise. When? Tell me, what have you been expecting God to do in your life that hasn't happened yet? Abraham had to wait three generations. What are you waiting for?

As a congregation we're asking "When?" aren't we? "When are we going to get our new church built? When are those roads and utilities going to be constructed? When will the Fairfax County authorities give us our permits?" And God is holding up a placard that says, "This is a test!" But there's always a delay. All God's saints have experienced delays. Moses waited 80 years; Noah waited 120 years; Abraham waited his lifetime. God always gives His children the waiting test.

A major change – a real believer will follow God's leading when he doesn't know where.

A delayed promise – a real believer will wait for God's timing when he doesn't know when.

3. An IMPOSSIBLE PROBLEM. Let's read Hebrews 11:11: "By faith Abraham, even though he was past age — and Sarah herself was barren — was enabled to become a father because he considered Him (i.e. God) faithful Who had made the promise."

You know the story. Abraham is 99 years old, and he still doesn't have a son by his wife Sarah, and God says that he's going to be the father of many nations (Genesis 17:4). That's what his name "Abraham" means, "the father of many nations." And someone says, "How many children do you have, Abraham?" "Zip." How embarrassing! "How old are you?" "Ninety-nine." An impossible problem. It was physically impossible for Sarah to have a child. She was 90. And when God told them that they were going to have a child, they laughed! And they named that child "Isaac" which means "laughter." They're saying, "This kid's a joke!"

An impossible problem is when you wonder "how," not "where," not "when," but "How are You going to do it, Lord?"

The “how’s” of life! Some of you are worried, and you are discouraged, and you say, “I just don’t know how this is all going to play out. I just don’t know how God is going to help me.” “God, how am I going to make ends meet this month?” “God, how is my business going to survive?” “God, how am I going to put the children through college?” “God, how are You going to heal me?” “God, how am I going to find time for ministry? I’m too busy already.” It’s a test — just like Abraham’s test. “God, how in the world are You going to change my husband - or my wife?!” “God, how are You going to get through to my son, my daughter?” The “how” question of life. What is the “how” test of a new believer? A real believer will expect a miracle without knowing how - without knowing how God is going to do it. But there’s one more test.

4. A SENSELESS TRAGEDY. We see this test in Abraham’s life, and it is the greatest, it is the ultimate test. I’m so glad God tells us in advance that it’s going to come, because it will come — you can count on it. And this ultimate test is a senseless tragedy. It’s not the “where” or the “when” or the “how” — it’s the “why” question of life. “God, why is this happening to me?”

Folks, an awful lot of things in this world don’t make sense. You say, “It’s not fair!” But who said the world was ever going to be fair? God never said it would be fair. That’s why there’s going to be a heaven and a hell. People say, “Do you believe in hell?” Of course I believe in hell, because one day God is going to settle the score; and the things that are unfair now will be settled then. It would be unfair for people like Hitler to get away with what they did. The justice and the fairness of God demand the existence of hell -

Senseless tragedy. Why? There’s an issue here that more people question than any other single thing in the Word of God - it’s then God asked Abraham to sacrifice his own son, Isaac. Isaac is a teenager; he was the miracle baby, the one in whom all of Abraham’s hopes and dreams reside. And God says, “I want you to sacrifice him.”

And our response to that is typical. We say, “It’s unfair!” We’re in shock. What is this? -- unadulterated barbarism? Why would God require something like that? Well, look what it says in verses 17 and 18: “By faith Abraham, when God had tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received 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.’”

What’s the issue here? Abraham was having a test, and it was a test of his commitment. Oh, it didn’t make sense. It seemed ridiculous, indeed tragic. There was no precedent for such an action. Abraham didn’t know about God like we do. He didn’t know fully the nature of God. He had never encountered the Lord Jesus; he didn’t know how loving and compassionate our heavenly Father is. All he knew was that God was saying, “Kill your son!” And Abraham had no assurance that God would spare Isaac. But look what he did have. Verse 19 says, “Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.” What was Abraham’s confidence? He thought, “Well, let me calculate this in my mind. If God can give me a son when I’m 100 and my wife 91; if God can perform that kind of a miracle, He can surely raise Isaac from the dead after he has been sacrificed.” But here is the point -- and this is why Abraham was such a great believer -- Abraham decided that God has a right to make any demand on my life He so chooses.

Let me tell you, folks -- that is true for you and me too. Because God is God He has a right to make any demand on your life, just because He says so. You wouldn't even be alive without God. You wouldn't have anything without God; and He has the sovereign right to do as He pleases; and it's a test. God did spare Isaac, as you know, at the last split second, after Abraham had raised the knife above his head. Figuratively speaking, God did raise Isaac from the dead. But here's the point, and here's the lesson: a real believer will trust God's purpose without knowing why -- even in the contradictions of life.

Some of you are going through the "why" test in life, and you're asking God "Why?" In evangelical churches across this country Christians are asking, "God, why did I get fired?" "God, why did You let my spouse have an affair?" "God, why did my kid run off and get on drugs?" "God, why am I going bankrupt?" "God, why is my child autistic, or epileptic, or the victim of Down's syndrome?" "Why did I have a miscarriage?" "Why did my husband die?" "Why was my child killed in a tragic accident?" "Why are all these things happening to me? I don't understand it."

Let me tell you this -- there's nothing wrong with asking questions. I think Abraham did, just as we do. But the issue is: How do you respond when you don't get an answer -- especially when God is silent as to the "why" questions? That is the test of a real believer.

I ask someone, "Do you believe in God?" "Sure!" "Are you a believer?" "Yes, of course." Don't be so quick. I told you recently about George Gallup taking a poll which revealed that 96% of Americans said they believed in God. Big deal! The Bible says the devil believes in God. The demons believe and tremble (James 2:19), but you're not going to see them in heaven. It takes more than mere intellectual assent to really believe in God. So -

A real believer will follow God's direction when he doesn't know where.

A real believer will wait on God's timing when he doesn't know when.

A real believer will expect a miracle when he doesn't know how. And

A real believer will trust God's purpose and love and character when he doesn't know why.

That's the test. You see, the fact is, God never gave Abraham any explanation for these tests. And do you know why we have so many spiritually immature people? Because we always demand an explanation for everything. We think God owes it to us. Let me just say this: If you have got all of the where's and when's and how's and why's figured out in your life, you are not living by faith. It's that simple.

So, are you a real believer? You know, the thing about human tests is this -- when you take a human test, the key to acing it is knowing all the answers! You study, you know all the answers, and you ace the test. But the way to ace God's tests is to keep on believing when you don't have the answers, and you don't know where you're going, and you don't know when or how God is going to accomplish His plan for your life, and you don't know why awful things are happening to you -- but you keep on believing and trusting. That's the test -- to hang on to God

even when you don't have the answers.

Now, which of these tests are you dealing with right now? Is it the "where" or the "when" or the "how" or the "why" test? Perhaps it's all four!

Tell me, how do you rate as a real believer this morning? Some of you are saying, "I flunk! I don't pass the test at all!" Do you remember that man in the Gospels that I spoke about a Sunday or two ago - the man who brought his epileptic son to Jesus for healing? And do you remember how Jesus said to him, "Everything is possible for him who believes"? And immediately that poor, distressed man exclaimed, "Lord, I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:23,24). And the glorious truth is that Jesus healed the boy on the basis of that kind of faith! It was enough. "God, I want to believe; help me with all my doubts." And Jesus said, "That's enough; your boy is healed!"

My friend — it doesn't take a lot of faith. How many times have I said that? It's just a little faith in a big God that gets big results!

AMEN.