

Does Christianity Work?

Rich Nathan

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Heroic Faith Series

Hebrews 11.8-19

If you've been a Christian for any length of time, one of the experiences you will certainly have is observing that many people, who make an initial commitment to church and to Christ, walk away after a month or six months. Sometimes they walk away after five or ten years, or even twenty years. If you inquire of those folks and ask them, "Why did you walk away?" you might hear a variety of reasons like: Well, we got really busy after the baby was born. It became less and less easy to go to church. My job changed. We were dealing with all the issues surrounding my mother-in-law's health. We moved.

But often it is not just busyness that causes people to walk away from church or from Christ. If you listen long enough, one of the themes that emerges is disappointment with the way Christianity worked out for them. I thought that Christianity would work better than it did, or different than it did. I thought that if I became a Christian and prayed and went to church, I would find a really great guy, or my marriage would turn around, or my child would be healed, or my business would succeed, or this particular problem in my life would change. None of those things really happened, so Christianity just didn't work for me.

This was the situation that the writer of the Book of Hebrews which we've been looking at over the course of the summer was addressing in his New Testament book. As I've mentioned before, recipients of this letter to the Hebrews were under tremendous pressure. They had experienced hardship. Some of them lost their businesses. Some of them had their houses broken into and their possessions taken because they were Christians. They were being persecuted. Some were being imprisoned. They were certainly marginalized in the community. They were under tremendous pressure and many of them began asking "Where is all this wonderful peace and joy that I thought I would experience, if I became a Christian? I thought God would help me out."

These folks were particularly troubled because when they read their Bibles which in that day was the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament. The New Testament was just being written. When they read their Bibles, they said "It seems like God always went to the rescue of people in the Bible." Daniel was thrown into the lion's den, but God shuts the mouth of the lion. God sent a flood, but Noah gets to sail out of it with his family in an ark. God doesn't seem to do those same things with us as he did with the people we read about in the Bible. Does Christianity really work, or should we go back to our ancient Jewish practices and start trying to offer sacrifices again; engage in all the rituals of the Jewish Temple, and all the laws regarding what we can eat and not eat.

Does Christianity work? How would you answer that question, if you were talking with someone, who was under tremendous pressure, going through a really dark time? Their child was

extremely sick. Their family was falling apart. They were unemployed. Does Christianity work? That may be a question that some of you have today as you listen to this message. Let's pray.

Hebrews 11:8–19 (NIV)

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. 9 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. 10 For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 11 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. 12 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.

13 All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. 14 People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. 15 If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

17 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, 18 even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." 19 Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.

Now, as an initial matter, one thing that the writer to the Hebrews mentions is that it is not the case that the people we read about in the Bible had such easy lives; that they were always rescued; that they knew what the future was going to hold. When you examine the actual lives of the people in the Bible, who knew God and walked with God, their lives were really, really hard. They went through wars. God's people were slaves for hundreds of years. They were persecuted. God's people were taken prisoner, and shipped off to foreign countries where they lived as exiles and refugees. Promises that God made took decades to fulfill. Where did we ever get the idea that the lives of the people in the Bible were easy or that they were always instantly rescued?

Just look at the life of Jesus. Did Christianity work for him? Was his life all sweetness and light?

The text that we're going to look at tells us that what makes people wonder if Christianity works are all the tests that we face. Look with me at v. 17:

Hebrews 11:17 (NIV)

17 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,

What makes a relationship with God so hard is all the tests that we face. The reason people say Christianity doesn't work is because we're constantly being tested and we didn't think we were signing up for tests. We think Christianity ought to be like one of those gut courses in college that you can get an A in just by showing up. You know, the kinds of courses that some universities have designed for their star athletes – Football 101, Weight-Lifting 101. We suddenly discover that Christianity isn't like one of those gut courses that requires nothing of us. When we sign up for a relationship with God, it is like a graduate level course with a professor who has a really high bar and who gives killer exams.

It says in v. 17

Hebrews 11:17 (NIV)

17 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,

...that Abraham was tested. The Jewish rabbis who studied the Hebrew Bible said actually Abraham was tested ten times in his life. He was tested when he was told to leave his home city and wander out to a land that he had never been to. That was a test. He was tested when his nephew wanted the best part of the land and there was a family dispute about property. He was tested when his wife, Sarah, couldn't get pregnant. He and his wife were tested by infertility.

Why tests?

If you sign up for a relationship with God, if you choose today to become a Christian by putting your trust in this person named Jesus Christ, and trusting that when this person Jesus died on a cross, he died to pay for your sins. If you choose to become a Christian today by committing yourself to follow this person, Jesus, who died for your sins, you will be tested repeatedly by God. Why tests?

There are really two reasons that the Bible gives us for being tested. The first is to show us, and the second is to grow us.

To show us

Let me give you a concrete example. Let's say you are in school and you are going to be given a math test. Well the math test is designed to show you whether or not you understand these particular concepts. Do you understand what a quadratic equation is? Or how to solve for X in this algebra problem? One of the things a test does is it shows you where you're at – how much you've advanced, whether you can handle this particular problem.

And the second reason that tests are given is to grow us.

To grow us

If you know a teacher is going to give you a test and you are a good student, you will prepare for that test by studying. You say, “How can I really understand these problems so that when face them on the test, I will be able to respond well?” Tests not only show us where we’re at; tests force us to grow and to change.

Let me put it this way. Because of inertia – you know what inertia is from 8th grade science: “A body at rest tends to stay at rest.” Inertia. A body sitting in front of a TV for too long eating Cheez Whiz and pork rinds tends to remain at rest. Inertia. Our pattern of prayerlessness, our pattern of general laziness, the pattern in our lives of everything just heading toward dissolution, whether we are talking about our eating habits, our shopping and spending habits, or spending hours watching TV or social media, sex outside of marriage. It is incredibly difficult to overcome human inertia without God’s tests. Willpower just doesn’t do it, does it? Willpower won’t get us off the sofa and get a bunch of disciplines into our lives. Willpower won’t get us exercising and eating right and spending right, and praying right and getting off of Facebook.

Willpower doesn’t change us, but tests do. Put a major crisis in our lives, one of those unexpected tests, unanticipated challenges, a child is suddenly stricken with a disease, a threat of divorce, a sick spouse, a dying parent, a heart-attack, a broken relationship, a lawsuit, a layoff from work, a failed pregnancy test – put a test in our lives and suddenly we have all the motivation we need to change.

The truth is most of us are propelled forward not because we are such great people. We often change because it is too painful to live as we are. As CS Lewis said,

Pain is God’s megaphone designed to awaken a sleeping world.

The tests are designed for our benefit. Testing is designed to be soul-building, to make us stronger, more obedient, and more internally consistent with our stated beliefs, and closer to God.

What are the tests that Abraham faced and that the people who received this letter to the Hebrews faced? Indeed, what are the tests that we face today?

The first text that we read about here in these verses from Hebrews 11 is

The test of assimilation

God’s people are always in danger of being assimilated, that is of taking on all of the beliefs and traits of their surrounding cultures so that over time there is nothing distinctive about God’s

people compared to everyone else. They live the same way everyone else does, they believe the same things, they laugh at the same jokes, and they relate the same way, and express the same ideas. God's plan for creating a distinct people, who would be a light to the dark world, who could be salt in this decaying world, is always in danger of being defeated. In facing the test of assimilation, we are called to be different.

Be different

Look at this with me in v. 9:

Hebrews 11:9 (NIV)

9 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.

And in v. 13:

Hebrews 11:13 (NIV)

13 All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth.

Many of you are immigrants. We have folks attending Vineyard Columbus from over 120 different countries. Some of you are the children of immigrants. There are around 20 million adult, American-born children of immigrants living in the United States. Listen to this story:

This woman writes:

SLIDE

I am one of them. I am the daughter of two immigrants from Peru and Argentina. My roots are not directly below me, beneath this ground that I stand on, but instead reach to many parts of the world. Technically, I am an American, but that label doesn't quite seem to fit. For much of my childhood I felt tension between the culture I was immersed in at school and the culture that my mother kept alive within our home, the one I returned to each night. I ate milanesas and lomo saltado, while my friends at school ate peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and spoke about their excitement for a holiday I never celebrated, Thanksgiving. I spoke Spanish until I felt too different from others. When I began primarily speaking English, people were shocked whenever they heard a pale girl, "Yo soy Latina" which means "I am a Latina."

To sign up for a relationship with God means to sign up to be different, to be distinct from our surrounding culture which is always trying to squeeze you, me and our children into its mold, and to feel tension with surrounding culture.

Now, throughout history God's people have chosen different ways to respond to the pressure we experience from the culture to come into line, to march according to society's beat, to behave and believe like everyone else. Sometimes God's people chose the way of withdrawal from the larger society. In the 1st century we see that among a group called the Essenes. Throughout church history we see that among folks who chose to be monks and live in a monastery behind thick walls. We see this way of withdrawal today among the Amish.

Sometimes God's people have chosen to respond to the pressure of the larger society by fighting with the world. In the 1st century that is what the Zealots did. That's what culture warriors today do. We're going to launch a war against Hollywood, or against the media – usually not against other things like materialism, consumerism, war or racism – but it is the approach of many fundamentalist churches to go to war against the larger society.

Sometimes people respond to the pressures of the larger society by conforming. In the 1st century the Sadducees did that. They assimilated with Roman culture. They said "We're not going to fight the culture. We're just going to go along and get along. We want to succeed; if you're going to succeed in this world, you need to know how to play the game." So the Sadducees played the game. And there are many folks today who have learned to play the game. We know where the wind is blowing. We know what the polls say and so we're going to change our views and our practices like a weathervane whenever the wind shifts. We're going to conform.

Sometimes God's people have responded to all of the pressure not by physically withdrawing, but by legalism, by coming up with a set of rules that would separate them from the larger society. In the 1st century the Pharisees did that. Many conservative churches do that. Well, we physically live on the same street, but we have all of these rules to form a shell of protection around us or our kids – no trick-or-treating, even if you dress up like a character from the Bible, no movies, except perhaps those in which all of the people accept Jesus at the end of the movie.

For those of us who choose to become followers of Christ, Christ wants us to be different. We always face the test of assimilation. But if you don't want to respond by legalism, or becoming a culture warrior, or just conforming or giving in, or withdrawing out to the country somewhere, it is hard to live in the midst of this society or any society, to live and work in this world and have your kids go to this world's schools and universities and not be conformed, to form within yourself and within your children a value system, a way of thinking about life, to form within yourself and your kids a set of attitudes, a set of beliefs, to form within yourself and your kids a set of practices that cause you to be able to live in the world, but be different from the world, that's hard.

Not assimilating is an incredibly challenging test. Many folks give up and say, "Christianity doesn't work. I can't do this."

The test of assimilation, be different, and

Be uncomfortable

It says in v. 9:

Hebrews 11:9 (NIV)

9 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.

God's people spent their lives living in tents. Certainly, one thing that living in a tent is meant to communicate to us is that we live in a temporary dwelling. Life in this world is temporary. It is not our permanent home. But there is something else about the fact that every follower of Christ is called to live in a tent. It means that every follower of Christ is meant to be uncomfortable in this world. The writer doesn't say that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob lived in an incredible beachfront property right on the Mediterranean in the Promised Land. He doesn't say they lived in a penthouse apartment in Jerusalem overlooking the hills of Judea. They lived in tents.

Marlene and I did a lot of tent camping for the first 20 years of our marriage. We certainly love to sit by the campfire at night and I loved the smell of bacon cooking in the morning on a campfire. But living in a tent for a few weeks is uncomfortable and we didn't do it back then with the air mattresses and all the stuff people have today. We put our sleeping bags on the ground and it was really uncomfortable when it poured and the tent leaked and our clothes got wet.

Abraham lived in tents as did his son, Isaac and his grandson, Jacob. The world should always feel uncomfortable to you. If you are an American, and you go anywhere else in the world, there are things about other cultures that will make you uncomfortable. For example, when I travel in many countries I think have they not heard of ice machines? I mean, as an American I like ice in my drinks. I don't like my drinks being served at room temperature. And I expect constant refills by a really attentive server. But I tell you, friends, you go anywhere in the world and you won't get refills on coffee, or refills on coke. And you will not find the helpful, attentive server anywhere in the world like you find it in the US. In fact, you're lucky if your server will ever look at you.

Eric and Julia Pickerill, along with a team, planted a church in Amsterdam. I went over to visit them and I wanted to purchase a European adapter for my plugs. So I went to a department store with one of the team members to buy a little adapter. There was a woman working in the electronic section of the department store. I said to her, "Excuse me, do you speak English." She said, "Yes." Many Dutch folks speak English. I said, "I wonder if you could help me." She looked at me and then yelled in my face, "No" and turned around and walked away. I stood there shocked. I couldn't imagine that ever happening in an American store. I was uncomfortable, to say the least.

And for the many of you who were born outside of the US, there are aspects of American life and the way Americans relate that make you feel uncomfortable. Friend, no matter where you were born, if you are a follower of Christ – I know there are many of you who are not, but if you are a

follower of Christ, you ought to be uncomfortable with so many aspects of living in this world. Maybe the fact that media is so sex-drenched or full of violence makes you uncomfortable. Maybe you are uncomfortable with the clothing choices available for your middle or high school daughter. Maybe you are uncomfortable with the political rhetoric that is used by our politicians and pundits today – the meanness, the sheer ignorance, the arrogance. Maybe you are uncomfortable with the office gossip, or the office politics, or the greed in your place of work.

Here is a big test facing everyone who wants to be in relationship with God. The test of assimilation. We're called to be different. We're called to be uncomfortable in this world.

Then in Abraham's life we see the test of obedience.

The test of obedience

Does Christianity work? So often it is the test of obedience that causes many of us to wonder what it is we signed up for when we chose to follow Christ. I don't know why God tests the friendship of some of his people as severely as he does and asks the question: Will you still trust and obey me despite everything that you're going through? It's the test of obedience. Look with me at vv. 17-18:

Hebrews 11:17–18 (NIV)

17 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, 18 even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned."

The test of obedience really boils down to this. We experience a great conflict. Sometimes it seems like a direct contradiction between a command of God and what seems like the path of blessing for our lives. In Abraham's case, God commands him to sacrifice his son, Isaac. But that command contradicts what seems like the path of blessing. God had promised to bring blessing to the world through Abraham's son, Isaac. How can I obey you, God, on the one hand and, yet, give up this blessing in my life, on the other?

Have you found yourself facing this conflict between obedience and what seems like the path of blessing? Some of you may say, "I'm not sure." Let me bring this down because all of us have been in this situation. You are a single woman and you want to be in relationship. You are a Christian and would love to date a Christian, but you haven't met any Christians that you want to be with. And you know what many Christian men are like. You've met this really great guy at work, or at the gym. He is really nice and he has a job. He is not bad to look at and he seems interested you. There's just this one small problem – he is not a Christian.

You're facing a test. If I obey God and I choose not to date outside the faith that conflicts with what appears to be the path of blessing, the path of my happiness, the path of my fulfillment. Which will you choose? Obedience, or the path of blessing?

You choose to date this woman or this man; they're not a Christian, but you fall in love. Now what are you going to do? Here is the test of obedience. Will I obey God and not marry outside of the faith, or will I choose what seems like the path of blessing for me. Marrying him, marrying her seems to be the way I'm going to experience joy, the way I'm going to experience fulfillment, the way I'm going to escape my problems, no longer be alone.

You've made a mistake at work, or at home, or you've done something really wrong. Maybe you've sinned and your boss or your spouse or your parents or your girlfriend or boyfriend ask you about this mistake or this sin. It's the test of obedience. Do you tell the truth and admit your mistake, admit your sin? Or do you follow what seems to be the path of blessing? If I lie, I will save face. If I lie, I won't get into trouble. If I lie, I won't risk my job or my marriage or my relationship.

Abraham had faced the test of obedience many times before. There were a number of occasions when Abraham was faced with the conflict of obeying God and pursuing what seemed to be the path of blessing. To put it more simply, there were many occasions in the past where Abraham was forced to choose between God's wisdom and his own wisdom. The reason why Abraham was able to pass this test of being willing to offer up his son, Isaac, even though it seemed to block the path of blessing, was because he learned through life's hard knocks that choosing his own wisdom did not lead ultimately to blessing. When he chose his wisdom instead of God's wisdom, it led him to disaster. Through life's hard knocks many of us have learned that there is no ultimate conflict between obedience and the path of blessing. We've learned the hard way that obeying God is the path of blessing, that God's wisdom is always better than our wisdom.

Here is the third test that Abraham faced

The test of returning the gift

Abraham was called to sacrifice his son, Isaac. You know, God's tests are particularly challenging, if the test is in an area where you've been tested before and you felt that you passed the test. In Abraham's case, he waited and waited for his miracle baby. And finally, as a very old man he and Sarah conceived and Isaac was born. After waiting for decades for a child, God now says he's going to take Isaac from Abraham. The gift he gave Abraham is going to have to be returned.

Think about this with me and how hard that must have been. It is one thing to pray and pray for something that you don't yet have and you do not get. It is another thing to pray and pray and then receive the blessing from God and then have God come along and say, "I'm going to take that blessing back from you." When we receive an answer to prayer we often think this is it. I've gotten to the top of the mountain. Now I can rest. I've secured what I've been seeking from the Lord. Surely, God's not going to take me back down into the valley again.

I think it is harder to get something and then to lose it, than to never have it at all – whether we’re talking about a great ministry, a great marriage, a child, a foster child, success in business, or a great healing. Abraham had the gift in his hand. The test was having to open his hand and to give the gift back.

Why did God ask Abraham to sacrifice his son? If you’ll permit me to engage in a little pastoral speculation here, maybe Abraham asked God to show him how will God bless the world through him? God had promised to bless the world through Abraham. But maybe Abraham asked how? God decided not to tell him how, but to show him how in his own experience. “Abraham, the way I will bless the world is by offering up the Son I love. I will offer my Son, Jesus.” And God may show us in our own experience what he went through to save the world, to give up a child, to be lonely, to be falsely accused, or abused, and to be criticized for doing what’s right.

Some of you are facing the test of possibly being asked to return a gift to God, or you were asked in the past to return a gift to God and you know how hard that is. To release someone who you love, or something you love back to God. The truth is, friends, ultimately all the gifts God gives us in this world will be returned to him. We just get to enjoy these gifts temporarily and then we have to give them back – our parents, our friends, our careers, our health, our very lives will return to God. This is a very severe test.

Now, the context of all of these tests – the test of assimilation, the test of obedience, the test of returning our gifts – is found in the final test that I want to mention today,

The test of ultimate hope

Listen, there are dozens of people who are all around you who would absolutely tell you that in this or that way Christianity worked for them. Because they became a follower of Christ, their marriage was saved. Because they became a follower of Christ, they were freed of a horrible addiction. Because they became a follower of Christ, they were finally able to forgive what before seemed unforgiveable. There are any number of people you might meet who would tell you that of course, Christianity works. Christ has given us a purpose to live for. He’s given us meaning. He’s given us a new identity. He’s given us the power to love someone else and not always choose our own way.

But there are times when Christianity doesn’t seem to be working and we need something beyond our immediate circumstances, or our feelings, or our present experiences. And here is the test of ultimate hope.

What does it take to leave everything like Abraham and move to a place of less comfort, more risk, more challenges? What does it take to put yourself and your financial future, your reputation, your safety, even the safety of your family on the line? What does it take to be different in a world that wants to squeeze you into its mold? To be obedient even when

obedience seems to rob you of the path to blessing? What does it take to return one of the precious gifts that God has given you and to still go on trusting God?

It takes a hope that goes beyond our present circumstances, that goes beyond this week, this month, this year, maybe even this life. Look with me at v. 10:

Hebrews 11:10 (NIV)

10 For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

And then at v. 16:

Hebrews 11:16 (NIV)

16 Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

And v. 19:

Hebrews 11:19 (NIV)

19 Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.

Here is the final test. Do you believe in an ultimate hope that transcends this world and this life? An ultimate hope. Think about this with me. Why in the world would you ever speak up about injustice, or do the right thing, if it is really going to cost you? Why not just play it safe and lie low? Keep your head down? If you are ever going to do something really significant in this world, you've got to be willing to risk, to put it on the line, to risk your financial security, to risk your reputation. And you are not going to be able to do that, if you don't have clearly fixed in your mind and heart an ultimate hope.

I mentioned to you that while we were on vacation Marlene and I along with our granddaughter, Naomi, did a brief Civil Rights tour of Alabama. We went to the church where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached for six years, Dexter Avenue Baptist, in Montgomery, Alabama.

In one of Dr. King's sermons titled "Shattered Dreams," he said that Christian faith calls us to always hope for something better. In speaking to African Americans of his day who were living under the brutal injustice of segregation and Jim Crow laws, King said:

Some of us of course, will die without ever having received the realization of freedom, but we must continue to sail on our charted course. We must accept finite disappointment, but we must never lose infinite hope. Only in this way shall we be able to live without the fatigue of bitterness and the drain of resentment. This was the secret of the survival of our slave fore-parents. ...When a new morning offered only the same long rows of cotton,

sweltering heat, and the rawhide whip of the overseer, these brave and courageous men and women dreamed of the brighter day. They had no alternative except to accept the fact of slavery, but they clung tenaciously to the hope of freedom. In a seemingly hopeless situation, the fashioned within their souls a creative optimism that strengthened them. Genuine faith imbues us with the conviction that beyond time is a divine Spirit and that beyond life is Life. However dismal and catastrophic may be the present circumstance, we know that we are not alone, for God dwells with us. God's creative power is not exhausted by this earthly life, nor is his majestic love locked within the limited walls of time and space. Even if we die without having received the earthly promise, he shall lead us down that mysterious road called death and at last to that indescribable city he has prepared for us. Our earthly life is a prelude to a glorious new awakening, and our death is an open door that leads us into life eternal.

It's the promise of God – something bigger, something better. There's life that goes beyond this life that confirms to us that Christianity works. It ultimately works in a way far better than we can ask or imagine. We have a foretaste of it working now; but we will experience our faith completely and ultimately working when we see the Lord and we experience life eternal. Let's pray.

Benediction - Ephesians 3.20-21

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen.

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