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*Holiness
and Faith*

BY FAITH ABRAHAM, WHEN
CALLED TO GO TO A PLACE
WHICH HE WOULD LATER
RECEIVE AS HIS POSSESSION,
OBEYED AND WENT, EVEN
THOUGH HE DID NOT KNOW
WHERE HE WAS GOING.

Hebrews 11:8

In the pursuit of holiness Christians are often called on to perform duties that appear unreasonable and even absurd to an unbelieving world. A Christian farmer in Kansas is a case in point. When wheat is exactly ready to be harvested, it is important that the work be completed quickly lest bad weather arise and damage the crop or reduce its quality. Because of this, harvesting is often done on a seven-day-a-week schedule. But this particular farmer, believing Sunday should be observed as the Lord's Day, would never work his harvest crew on Sunday, even when an impending storm threatened. To his neighboring farmers this action appeared strange and unreasonable. Interestingly enough, however, over the years this Christian farmer was the most

prosperous in his area. Like Abraham, he obeyed by faith what he believed to be the will of God, even though such obedience must undoubtedly have been difficult at times.¹

Though we often think of holiness in a more narrow sense of separation from impurity and moral evil, in its broader sense holiness is obedience to the will of God in whatever God directs. It is saying with Jesus, "Here I am . . . I have come to do Your will, O God" (Hebrews 10:7). No one can pursue holiness who is not prepared to obey God in every area of his life. The holiness described in the Bible calls us to do more than separate ourselves from the moral pollution of the world around us. It calls us to obey God even when that obedience is costly, when it requires deliberate sacrifice and even exposure to danger.

During my service in the Navy, I was once in charge of an operation where a mishap occurred in which a valuable boat was lost and a dozen or more lives were endangered. It was a situation that could have seriously jeopardized my future naval service. Though the cause of the mishap was mechanical failure, it was also true that we were not conducting the operation exactly according to the rules. During the ensuing investigation, the temptation to protect myself by covering up this fact was extremely strong, but I knew I had to be completely truthful and trust God for the consequences. God blessed that obedience — the investigation focused totally on the mechanical failure, and my career was not harmed.

Obedience to the revealed will of God is often

just as much a step of faith as claiming a promise from God. In fact, one of the more intriguing thoughts from the Book of Hebrews is the way the writer appears to use obedience and faith interchangeably. For example, he speaks of the Old Testament Hebrews who would never enter God's rest because they *disobeyed* (3:18). Yet they were not able to enter because of their *unbelief* (3:19). This interchange of unbelief and disobedience also occurs later in the book (4:2,6).

The heroes of faith described in Hebrews 11 were said to be "still living by faith when they died" (verse 13). But in this chapter we see that the element of obedience — responding to the will of God — was just as prominent in their lives as was claiming the promises of God. The important point, however, is that they obeyed *by faith*. And since obedience is the pathway to holiness — a holy life being essentially an obedient life — we may say that no one will become holy apart from a life of faith.

Faith is not only necessary to salvation, it is also necessary to live a life pleasing to God. Faith enables us to claim the promises of God — but it also enables us to obey the commands of God. Faith enables us to obey when obedience is costly or seems unreasonable to the natural mind.

Several illustrations from Hebrews 11, the great "faith" chapter, bring out this truth. For example, by faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain did, and through this received God's approval (verse 4). We can assume that God had revealed to Cain and Abel the duty of offering

sacrifices and the acceptable way of performing that duty. It is apparent from the rest of Scripture that God's acceptable way was through the sacrifice of a lamb — through the shedding of blood. Now *by faith* Abel believed what God said. He took Him at His word and obeyed, even though it is likely he did not understand *why* the sacrifice of the lamb was the only acceptable sacrifice. Cain, on the other hand, did not believe God's revelation regarding an acceptable sacrifice — perhaps because it did not appear reasonable to him — so he did not obey and thus failed to obtain the blessing of God.

The world's values surround us on every hand. Fame, fortune, and present happiness are held as the most desirable goals in life. But the Bible flatly contradicts the value of these goals: "Whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave" (Matthew 20:26-27). The rich should not "put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain," but are told to hope in God, "to be rich in good deeds and to be generous and willing to share" (1 Timothy 6:17-18). It takes faith to pursue such biblical values when the society around us is pursuing goals that are totally opposite. This faith focuses on believing that God ultimately upholds and blesses those who obey Him, and who trust Him for the consequences of obedience.

Noah's life is an example of this kind of faith: "By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith" (Hebrews

11:7). God's revelation to Noah concerning the forthcoming judgment on the world was first of all a warning. By faith Noah believed that warning. He had conviction about things not yet seen based solely upon the revealed Word of God. Noah also had confidence that the way of salvation from the impending judgment was through God's appointed means — the ark. He responded to that promise, and so saved both himself and his family.

Noah's building of the ark may well be considered one of the greatest examples the world has ever witnessed of perseverance in a difficult duty of obedience. For 140 years he labored because he both heeded the warning of God and believed the promise of God.

Abraham's life also illustrates the obedience element of faith. The call of Abraham consisted of two parts — a command and a promise. The command was to leave his father's house and go to a land God would show him. The promise was that God would make of him a great nation, and through him bless all the families of the earth. Abraham believed that both the command and the promise came from God, so he obeyed the command and expected fulfillment of the promise. It is recorded of him, "By faith Abraham . . . obeyed" (Hebrews 11:8).

The Bible records the story of Abraham's faith and obedience in such a matter-of-fact way that we can easily overlook the difficulty of his obedience and the faith it required. John Brown likens the case of Abraham to "a person, previous to the discovery of America, leaving the shores of Europe, and

committing himself and his family to the mercy of the waves, in consequence of a command of God and a promise that they should be conducted to a country where he should become the founder of a great nation, and the source of blessing to many nations."²

The path of obedience in the pursuit of holiness is often contrary to human reason. If we do not have *conviction* in the necessity of obeying the revealed will of God as well as *confidence* in the promises of God, we will never persevere in this difficult pursuit. We must have conviction that it is God's will that we seek holiness — regardless of how arduous and painful the seeking may be. And we must be confident that the pursuit of holiness results in God's approval and blessing, even when circumstances make it appear otherwise.

Often in our lives a specific act of obedience will require both conviction and confidence. God's commandments to Israel to keep the sabbatical year was one such instance. He commanded that every seventh year the land should have a sabbath rest to the Lord, during which no sowing or pruning was to be done (Leviticus 25:3-4). Along with this command God promised that He would bless their crops in the sixth year so that they would have enough to eat till crops in the eighth year were harvested (Leviticus 25:20-22). Only as the Israelites had confidence in the promise of God would they dare to obey the command of God. Sadly, the Old Testament record seems to indicate they had neither the confidence in God's promise nor the conviction that His revealed will on this matter was

important to their national and spiritual prosperity.

A New Testament application of this same spiritual principle is found in the words of Jesus, "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33). The command is to seek God's kingdom first. The promise is that as we do, God will provide for our temporal needs. Because we are often fainthearted regarding the promise of God, we find it difficult to obey this command of God. Consequently we often give the affairs of this life top priority in the basic decisions of our lives.

Jeroboam, the first king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, also illustrates how lack of faith leads to disobedience. God promised: "Then it will be, that if you listen to all that I command you and walk in My ways, and do what is right in My sight by observing My statutes and My commandments, as My servant David did, then I will be with you and build you an enduring house as I built for David, and I will give Israel to you" (1 Kings 11:38).

Did Jeroboam believe God and obey Him? We read that he did not: "And Jeroboam said in his heart, 'Now the kingdom will return to the house of David. If this people go up to offer sacrifices in the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will return to their Lord, even to Rehoboam king of Judah; and they will kill me and return to Rehoboam, king of Judah.' So the king consulted, and made two golden calves, and he said to them, 'It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem; behold your gods, O Israel, that brought you up from the land of Egypt'" (1 Kings 12:26-28).

We could well think that Jeroboam had not even heard God's command and promise, so flagrantly did he disregard them. He certainly heard, but the message he heard was of no value to him because it was not combined with faith (Hebrews 4:2). But before we condemn Jeroboam, let us consider our own lives. How often do we fail to obey God's clearly revealed will because we do not exercise faith?

Because we do not believe that humility is the path to God's exaltation (1 Peter 5:6), we jockey for a place of position and power in our relations with others. Because we do not believe that God takes note of and will in His time avenge all wrongs done to us (Romans 12:19), we study in our own minds how we can "get back" at someone we feel has wronged us. Because we are not convinced of the deceitfulness of sin (Hebrews 3:13), we play with it thinking we will thereby find satisfaction. And because we do not have a firm conviction that "without holiness no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14), we do not seriously pursue holiness as a priority in our lives.

Faith and holiness are inextricably linked. Obeying the commands of God usually involves believing the promises of God. One definition of faith might be "Obeying the revealed will of God and trusting Him for the results."

"Without faith it is impossible to please God" (Hebrews 11:6). If we would pursue holiness we must have faith to obey the will of God revealed in the Scripture and faith to believe that the promises of God will then be ours.

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- NOTES: 1. We have already observed in Chapter 9 that sincere Christians disagree on what activities are appropriate for Sunday; nevertheless, this man was obeying God's will for him.
2. John Brown, *An Exposition of Hebrews* (1862; reprint edition, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1961), page 508.