

# HOLY HELP FOR THE HOPELESS

## WHO DIE IN FAITH

### Hebrews 11:17-22

*Please review this week's catechism question.*

#### INTRODUCTION

How often do you think about dying? How does the thought of your death or the death of those you love affect you? How have you responded to the death(s) of those you love and care for?

Death is the great enemy of humankind. The Bible regularly tells us that the presence of death makes a mockery out of human striving and accomplishment. Death is the nullifier of all human activity. However, the Bible does not only tell us that death is the great extinguisher of human hope and aspirations but tells us that death, for those who trust in Christ, does not end life. Death is no barrier to God's fulfilling his promises to us. Therefore those who live by faith in Christ do not, as William Lane has said, "recognize in death any threat to the fulfillment of the promise" of God. Christians do not fear death because they know that God's promise of life lived with him in the new heavens and the new earth forever cannot be nullified by death.

In our passage today the author of the letter to the Hebrews aims to demonstrate, through the lives of four men, how believers face death in faith and full of hope. If you'll remember that the people to whom this letter was written were undergoing persecution and were being threatened with death if they did not renounce Christ, you can see why he wants his audience to know that death cannot stop God from fulfilling his promises to us. Every person who has a true faith in Christ lives fearlessly and courageously and hopefully and productively in spite of death's certainty because of God's faithfulness.

#### STUDY

1. Heb. 11:17 and Genesis 22:1 both tell us that God's command to Abraham to offer Isaac as a burnt offering was a "test". 1 Peter 1:6-7 says, "...in this (salvation) you greatly rejoice though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of "tests". These (tests) have come so that your faith, ...may be proved genuine and may result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed." Why did God test Abraham? Why does he test believers?

*God gave the command to Abraham to kill his only son so that, having his faith purified, he would be eternally happy. The "test" strips away every other object or person you might trust in and requires that you trust only in God and his promises. Faith is the instrument that unites us to Christ. Therefore, having a pure faith is necessary for us to experience all the benefits Christ promises to us. The result is that a person's eternal joy is secured by their being united to Christ through their faith.*

2. According to Hebrews 11:17-18 what is the dilemma that God's command presents to Abraham?

*The command of God contradicts the promise of God. Three times God has promised Abraham that it is through Isaac that He will make Abraham's descendants into a great nation. One of those times is recorded in Hebrews 11:18, which is a quote from Genesis 21. Yet, God is commanding that the son of promise be killed. Is God a cruel and evil tyrant who delights in tormenting humans by impulsively promising one thing and then nullifying what he promised? Is he a God of contradiction? How can God command that the son through whom the whole world will be blessed (Genesis 12:3) be killed?*

3. According to Hebrews 19a how does Abraham reconcile the apparent contradiction? Why would Abraham arrive at this conclusion?

*Abraham knows that the God of the whole earth will do what is right. He is good and just and can be trusted. God has reasons for willing the death of Isaac and God will keep his promise of innumerable descendants through Isaac. Sometime between when God makes his demand and the arrival of Abraham and Isaac and his servants at*

*Mount Moriah Abraham figures out what God is going to do. Verse 19 tells us that Abraham reckoned that God has power to raise the dead. What is impossible for men is possible with God. By the time that Abraham had reached the mountain, he knew that he was going to see a miracle. He knew that God was going to bring back Isaac from the ashes of the fire. He did not know how, but he knew that God would provide. The God who had brought Isaac forth out of the deadness of his and Sarah's bodies could just as easily bring back Isaac from the dead. He still must go through the horrifying and terrible execution but he was able to do it because he knew that God was going to fulfill his promises by bringing Isaac back from the dead.*

4. The end of v. 19 literally says, "...whence also he received him by (in, with) a parable." "Parable" is used one other time in Hebrews, in 9:9 and is translated "illustration" in the NIV. What is an illustration and what does it illustrate in 9:9?

*The author, after describing how only the High Priest could enter into the Most Holy Place once each year says in v. 8 that the HS was showing through this ancient ceremony that the way to live in God's presence was not yet revealed. Then in v. 9 we are told that this ceremony is an illustration that shows that the OT system of worship did not gain forgiveness of sins or the right to live with God but that something greater was yet to come.*

5. What does the "resurrection" of Isaac illustrate or foreshadow?

*The point the author is making is that Isaac being received back from the dead was also an illustration, a parable of a future reality. That reality, of which Isaac's "resurrection" is an illustration, is the resurrection of Christ, which is followed by the resurrection of all those who belong to Christ.*

6. What difference should it make and does it make in your life that you are going to be raised from the dead because Christ was raised from the dead?

**Christians face death in faith, full of hope and without fear because God raises the dead.**

7. How do the next three events compare and contrast with the story of Abraham and Isaac?

*After this dramatic description of faith we are given the examples of three men who died as old men in relative peace and prosperity. The evidence of their faith is not seen in any deed like Abraham's obedience to the command to slay his son but simply in words they uttered at the end of their lives. Facing imminent death is what they share in common with Abraham's experience but their faith is seen in what they say and to whom they speak, not what they do.*

8. What is the main thing that these three men demonstrate as they come to the end of their lives and say the things they say?

*The main point of emphasis is that though they did not receive the promised salvation while living; yet by announcing future blessings on these sons and giving directions concerning a burial sight, they showed they were convinced their death would not prevent God from fulfilling his promises to them. The words they uttered at the end of their lives show that they were trusting God to do what he had promised them even though they knew they were going to die. They died, not in despair but full of joyful hope because they knew God was working out his plan to save his people and that included them.*

9. How are Isaac's blessing Jacob and Esau (v. 20) and Jacob's blessing Joseph's sons (v. 21) similar? See Genesis 25:19-23, 27:27-40 & 48:12-14 & 17-20.

*What they share in common is that when Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau and when Jacob blessed his grandsons, Ephraim and Manasseh, the sons of Joseph, each of them blessed the boys not in accordance with their status or their merit; not according to who they were or what they did. Rather, the boys were blessed in accordance with God's free and sovereign grace and contrary to human expectation.*

10. How does knowing that salvation is entirely a work of grace and not in any way dependent on human effort, desire or status help you as you contemplate death?

*Most people when they come to the end of their lives or when they confront the loss of one dearly loved are full of regret and guilt over what they have not done and what they have done. Death has a way of confronting us with our weakness and our sinfulness and our selfishness and our ingratitude. We feel how we've squandered our lives and misused the gifts we've been given. Our failures to love God and others loom over us. We often see ourselves for who we truly are when we stand in front of death. This self-revelation can create despair and fear of the highest proportions as we consider facing our creator. However, the gospel comes to us in this hour and assures us that we are not loved by God; we are not forgiven of our sins or promised eternal life because of who we are or what we have done. Rather God loves us and accepts us and will reward us with heaven because of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done. "For it is by grace that we have been saved through faith and this not from ourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works so that no one can boast." The blessing of God given to the younger sons through Isaac and through Jacob tells us that salvation does not hinge on our performance but on Christ's performance and so we can be full of joyful hope when death rears its head.*

**Christians face death in faith, full of hope and without fear because God's favor is not determined by human merit or status but is sovereign and free.**

**11.** What two things does Joseph talk about with the "sons of Israel" just before he dies? (Compare Genesis 50:24-25)

*He explained that the Lord was going to take them out of the land of Egypt and take them to the land of Canaan (he mentioned the Exodus) and he told them that when they left Egypt they should be sure to take his bones with them so he might be buried in the Land of Promise.*

**12.** What were the conditions that Joseph and the sons of Israel were living in when Joseph said this? (See Genesis 41:41-45, 47:11-12 & 27)

*He was taken to Egypt when he was a teenager after having been sold into slavery by his brothers. He is currently 110 years old. That means he has lived in Egypt for almost 100 years. While the first 10 to 15 years of living in Egypt were pretty rotten; for at least 75 years he has been the second most powerful man in the most powerful nation on earth. His wife is an Egyptian and his children were born here. His entire extended family is living in prosperity in this land with him. When Joseph says this, they are free people and can come and go as they please. They, under the protection of Joseph have also enjoyed a life of comfort and prosperity. Genesis 47:27 says about them, "They acquired property there and were fruitful and increased greatly in number."*

**13.** Twice Joseph tells Israel that God "will come to their aid" and take them out of Egypt. What does this tell us about how Joseph view's Egypt?

*In spite of the prosperity and power he has he does not view this land as his home. He has not been seduced by the wealth and power and domestic harmony and luxury that he has but his heart remains fixed on God's Promised Land. His heart is not in Egypt but is fixed upon that city that has foundations whose designer and builder is God. This is why he wants his bones carried to Canaan. But also notice what he says twice to his brothers: "The Lord will come to your aid." That's a crazy thing to say. The sons of Israel don't need God's aid to leave the land of Egypt. There was no danger in the land of Egypt that required God to come to their aid. But that is not how Joseph views Egypt. He recognizes that behind the smiling face of peace and prosperity lurks a barely restrained hostility against the people of God. He sees Egypt for what it is; a place of seduction and a place of suffering. He realizes that no matter how comfortable things might be yet it is not home. He does not want to live in Egypt and he recognizes that God does not want his people to live in Egypt. So by faith he prefers the unseen, eternal city that God has prepared for his people over the seen, temporal city he currently lives in. He recognizes that the only safe place for the people of God is heaven, not earth.*

**14.** How does the apostle Paul reveal this same attitude in Philippians 1:21-24, 3:10-21?

*As the Apostle Paul says in Philippians he views the loss of everything this world contains as gain because he will be with Christ. His chief ambition is being with Christ and this is what he eagerly awaits and pursues. He knows that his citizenship is in heaven and he is eagerly awaiting a savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ. The Exodus that Joseph foresees, which will be led by Moses is here viewed as a symbol of that final “exodus” when Jesus returns and removes all of his people, including the ones who are already in the grave, those who are just bones, out of this land of seduction and suffering and takes us into that eternal land of promise. The Lord Christ will indeed come to our aid and bring us to our home in the new heavens and the new earth with him forever.*

**15.** If you died today would it be gain or loss in your view? Why?

**16.** How does the knowledge that Christ is going to return and take us out of this world into the new heavens and the new earth affect how you think about and live in the present world?

**Christians face death in faith, full of hope and without fear because God will bring all of his people out of this land of seduction and suffering.**