

“Abraham’s Faith (Part 2)” – Hebrews 11:8-19

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com]

Take your Bible and let’s meet in Genesis 22...

We began looking at a story from the life of Abraham last Sunday. It is one of the last stories involving Abraham and, as I suggested, it involves what is arguably the greatest test of faith that we find in the Old Testament. It reminds us that...

God Tests People of Faith

This particular test is a difficult one to stomach. Look again with me at the first two verses of the chapter, the verses we considered last time...

“After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, ‘Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’² He said, ‘Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.’” (Genesis 22:1-2)

I cannot imagine hearing a request like this from the Lord. I’m not sure I could have made any sense out of it. All of my children are precious to me and the thought of parting with any of them is too much for me to consider. My only son, Asher, just turned 8 years old yesterday so I’m emotional enough as it is. The thought of being in Abraham’s shoes is just too much to bear.

But, remember, these verses involve more than just instructions to lay down his son at the altar. God is telling him to lay down his entire future on the altar. Earlier in Genesis, God made a covenant with Abraham. That covenant involved, among other things, that God would make Abraham’s name great by giving him countless descendants and making a great nation out of them. Abraham was assured that through his offspring all the nations of the earth would be blessed. So to make that possible, God miraculously gave Abraham and his wife, Sarah, a child in old age. They were told that it would be through this child that all of those promises would flow. So Isaac is not just a precious son. He is the son of promise. He represents the entire future of Abraham and all of the promises God had made to him.

So Genesis 22 comes out of nowhere. Who would have expected God to make such a request from a man, let alone this man. God had never tested anyone like this before and He would never do so again. And if Abraham follows through in obedience, it would seem, by human calculations, to bring his entire future to an end. He is being asked to do something *to* Isaac that doesn’t match what was promised to come *through* Isaac. It seems to contradict every other piece of Abraham’s story thus far. God is telling him to lay down his son, his entire future, on the altar before Him. And that’s a test we wouldn’t wish on anyone.

So how will Abraham respond? That question is about to be answered for us. If you know much of the man’s story to this point, you might expect him to start trying to negotiate with God or try to improvise some alternative outcome. It would be natural for Abraham to protest in some way. Bob Dylan even wrote a song where he puts a protest in Abraham’s mouth.¹ But Bob Dylan didn’t read the story close enough because that’s not what we find. And that brings us to the next series of lessons that we will consider this week and next, which have to do with the following fact:

People of Faith Obey God

Why? Because they trust Him. That's what faith is—trust in God. Remarkably, this is what we see in the response of Abraham. Look at verses 3 through 9, which will occupy our attention today and next Sunday. Follow along as I read. This is God's Word...

"So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him.⁴ On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar.⁵ Then Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.'⁶ And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together.⁷ And Isaac said to his father Abraham, 'My father!' And he said, 'Here I am, my son.' He said, 'Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?'⁸ Abraham said, 'God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.' So they went both of them together.⁹ When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood." (Genesis 22:3-9)

Can you imagine? What must have been going through Abraham's mind when he acted out these verses?

As it turns out we have a few clues—two here and one from the book of Hebrews. The first hint we have comes in Abraham's words to the young men in verse 5—“*Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.*” Did you catch that? He indicates that both he and the boy will return to them. If we take it at face value, it suggests that Abraham is holding on to hope.

The next hint comes in response to the haunting question of verse 7. Isaac asks his dad, “*Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?*” How would you have answered such a question?

Abraham's answer was very cryptic: “*God will provide for himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.*” Was this just wishful thinking on Abraham's part? Was “lamb” just a euphemism for his son or was he actually expecting God to provide a substitute in the place of his son? Do you think that Isaac was beginning to catch on at this point?

In the New Testament, the inspired writer of Hebrews gives us some perspective on Abraham's inner monologue. This is the Bible's own commentary on Abraham's faith:

"By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son,¹⁸ of whom it was said, 'Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.'¹⁹ He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead...." (Hebrews 11:17-19a)

This is how a man of faith reasons in the midst of trial and testing.² And it's incredible! Abraham believes that whether it is by providing a substitute for sacrifice or providing a resurrection from the dead, God is going to come through. He knows that God cannot be mistaken and he knows that God will not lie and that God doesn't have memory issues. God had previously assured Abraham that Isaac was the child through whom the promises would flow, so either God has a plan to deliver the boy by substitution or God can be counted on the raise the dead. That may seem like a crazy leap of faith, but Abraham rightly believes that a resurrection is more compatible with the nature of God than a contradiction is.³ He believes in the character and promise of God more than the surety or finality of the death of his son. That's faith in action. It's a resurrection faith. And it's this hope—this faith—that gives him the strength to keep moving up that mountain.

There are several lessons here about the nature of true obedience, which we will consider next week. But if we are to understand what Genesis 22 is teaching us about the nature of obedience, we must first understand what

Abraham in this story teaches us about faith. Why? Because from God's perspective true obedience flows from faith. You might say that faith is the root that produces the fruits of true obedience. So what does Abraham's offering of Isaac teach us about faith? Here Hebrews 11 is instructive. How does faith help us pass the tests of life, even when we may naturally object to the commands of God? Let me briefly suggest four answers from these verses in Hebrews 11. First of all, we learn that...

Faith Is Marked by Humble Submission

It's worth pointing out that while this is the hardest test of Abraham's faith, it's not the first. This test comes toward the end of his life. It's the culmination of his journey of faith. And his "success here is the product of earlier and lesser trials, many of which he failed, as God honed and refined his character and his faith."⁴ God's tests are never premature. They always follow His preparation. Abraham would not have passed this test in Genesis 12. But he is not the same man he was back then. He has grown spiritually. That's the only explanation for his actions in Genesis 22, where he in essence says, "Not my will, but yours be done" (cf. Luke 22:42). To arrive at that disposition we must recognize that we are the creature and not the Creator. "Abraham worshiped God as God and therefore did not place himself in the position of judge of the Most High and Lord of heaven."⁵

Listen, sometimes what God is doing is *not* going to make sense to you. Like Abraham, you have to trust that He has your best interests at heart. And you have to leave the difficulty with God. Peter gets at this in the New Testament.

"Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you,⁷ casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you." (1 Peter 5:6-7)

The pride of the world around you invites you to sit in judgment of God when you don't understand what He's up to. But biblical faith requires humility. What Peter says in these verses helps us to understand how to cultivate humility. How do you humble yourself? By casting your anxieties on God. The participle (i.e., "casting your anxieties") modifies and explains the command ("Humble yourselves"). We are humbled as we cast our anxieties on God. He can be trusted with your fears. And why would you entrust them to Him? Peter says, "*because he cares for you.*" And how do you know He cares for you? The Gospel. The good news that...

"God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." (John 3:16-17)

Your sin separates you from God. It creates a barrier. Nothing you can do can remove the barrier. You can't save yourself. Your only hope in life and death is for the Lord to provide. And God has provided for your salvation in Christ alone. He came to seek and save the lost. He did that by living the life we failed to live and dying the death that we deserved to die. He lives today because of His victorious resurrection. And if you will turn from your sin and trust in Him for your salvation, He will forgive you of all your sins and grant you everlasting life with Him. This is the Gospel. It's the good news that you can be saved through Christ. And our salvation is all of grace (not works) and through our faith in the person and work of Christ alone. So will you trust him to save you? He died for you to have this hope. Trust in Christ and, just like with Abraham, your faith will be credited as righteousness. God clothes the believer in Christ's perfect righteousness. Not ours. His. And that's why the Bible says, "*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*" (Romans 8:1)

In the end, this ought to convince us of God's love even when our circumstances tempt us to doubt. This is why the Apostle Paul writes,

“He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Romans 8:32)

God’s love for you is so strong that He would not even withhold His own Son for your salvation. If that biblical truth doesn’t convince you that God cares for you, then nothing will. And if you are convinced, then cast your anxieties on the Lord, so that humble submission can follow.

Faith Accepts Both Promises and Commands

Notice that Hebrews 11:17 describes Abraham as “*he who had received the promises*”. Your Bible is not perforated. It comes with promises and commands. You don’t get to retain the promises you like and tear out the stuff you don’t want to apply. This is what Job said to his wife in the midst of their trials: “*Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?*” (Job 2:10). You must accept the precepts and the promises, the comforts and the commands. Christ must be your Lord and your Savior or He will be neither.⁶ As A. W. Pink once stated, “Spiritual faith does not pick and choose: it fears God as well as loves Him.”⁷

Next...

Faith Seeks Understanding Through God’s Word

Hebrews 11:19 says, “[Abraham] considered that God was able even to raise [Isaac] from the dead.” As we have seen, Genesis doesn’t provide this internal reasoning. But when Abraham and Isaac leave the donkey behind with the servants, Abraham assures them, “We will come back.” That’s faith. He is looking ahead to substitution or resurrection (or both). But Abraham believes Isaac will return.

And, listen, that’s not just wishful thinking on Abraham’s part. Where does that assurance come from? From the Word of God. He didn’t have a Bible like you do, but God had specifically told him, “*Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.*” He knows that God has power over life because God brought life out of his wife’s dead womb. What God has revealed to him, is strengthening his faith. “Abraham’s understanding came from faithful reflection on what God had earlier revealed about himself.”⁸ The same is true for you. God has revealed Himself and His purposes for your life in His Word. If your faith is seeking understanding, look no further than the pages of your Bible.

Faith Does Not Require All Explanations

While Abraham had a strong conviction that God would come through in His time and in His way, Abraham did not have all the answers. He identifies some of the possibilities. But he, like us, had to leave the fulfillment of God’s promises to God. He like us had to trust that his circumstances would work out in the end for good. The Bible says,

“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)

Things are not always as they appear. When the circumstances of our lives take a turn for the worst or trend in that direction, we may be tempted to conclude that our life is out of control or that God does not care about our good. But God’s purposes in the lives of His children are *always* good. Always. And every circumstance that befalls us has been sifted through the sovereign hand of a God who loves His children and will use those circumstances for good.

Just because we do not always know how God will bring good out of our trials, doesn't make that outcome any less certain. He tells us enough for us to trust Him, not enough to satisfy our curiosities. But have you ever considered that it may be a kindness that God doesn't fill us in on those details?

In a book called, *The Hiding Place*, Corrie ten Boom recalls a story from her childhood when she and her dad were returning home on a train after purchasing some parts for his watch-making business. While they were en route, Corrie took the opportunity to ask her father about the meaning of a word she read in a school poem. It was an adult word. The question, as you can imagine, took her father a bit off guard. He thought about it for a moment, collected himself, stood up, and took down his suitcase from the rack. Here's how Corrie describes what happened next.

“Will you carry it off the train, Corrie?” he said. I stood up and tugged at it. It was crammed with the watches and spare parts he had purchased that morning. ‘It’s too heavy,’ I said. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘And it would be a pretty poor father who would ask his little girl to carry such a load. It’s the same way, Corrie, with knowledge. Some knowledge is too heavy for children. When you are older and stronger you can bear it. For now you must trust me to carry it for you.”⁹

Do you see? God is a wise Father and He knows when knowledge is too heavy for His children. He's not being mean or deceptive when He withholds explanations. No, no. He's carrying burdens for us. He delights to do that for us because He loves us. That's why He invites us to cast our anxieties on Him precisely because He cares for us (1 Peter 5:17). But, friends, that same care is often expressed by carrying the burden of knowledge. God's refusal to answer all our *why* questions is one of His most loving graces to us. Some day, when we are older and further along in maturity, He may allow us to carry more of the weight of such knowledge. In the meantime, we must remember that He is a loving Father, trust Him, and give thanks to Him for carrying more burdens than we know.¹⁰

So is your faith marked by humble submission? Does it accept God's promises and commands? Does it seek its understanding in God's revealed Word? Does it exist even in the absence of every explanation? This is the faith that God has called us to. And it's a faith that rests in a person—Jesus Christ.

Next week, I want to show several things we learn about obedience in this story. Then we'll consider the nature of God's provision. And finally, in a couple weeks, we will consider more fully how this story points to Christ. Hebrews 11:19 says,

“[Abraham] considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.” (Hebrews 11:19)

The words translated “figuratively speaking” are literally “in parable”. The idea is, “Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and *as a parable*, he did receive Isaac back from the dead.” It's another hint that this story is a shadow of greater story. The story of Jesus. Remember? The point of your Bible is Jesus. This story points to Him too and in more ways than you might expect.

Let's pray...

¹ It's called, *Highway 61 Revisited*:

"Oh God said to Abraham, 'Kill me a son'
Abe says, 'Man, you must be puttin' me on'
God says 'No'. Abe say, 'What?...'"

² James Montgomery Boice describes Abraham's inner-logic as follow: "God is not a liar. He cannot be mistaken. He told me, beyond question, that I should have a son, and there he walks before me. God has said that this son would be the one through whom he would fulfill all of his promises. Therefore, the son must live or God would be found false. And yet God commands that this son be put to death. Here, humanly speaking, is contradiction. But there is no contradiction in God. That is the foundation fact. There is power in God; there is wisdom in God; there is majesty and glory in God; but there is no contradiction in God. But what is to be done with God's command to sacrifice my son? Since there is no contradiction in God, there is only one answer that my mind can fathom. God is going to perform a miracle and raise Isaac from the dead. Doubt may say that this is foolish, that there has never been a resurrection in the history of the world. That doesn't make any difference. A resurrection is compatible with the nature of God, but a contradiction is not compatible with the nature of God. God is life and the author of life. It would be a small matter for the God who created the universe, including the first man, to bring life back into a dead body. So the one, clear, logical conclusion is that God is going to raise Isaac from the dead." James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 687.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Richard D. Phillips, *Hebrews* (REC; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), 473.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 474-475.

⁷ Pink, *Hebrews*, 748.

⁸ Phillips, 476.

⁹ Corrie ten Boom, John L. Sherrill, and Elizabeth Sherrill, *The Hiding Place* (Grand Rapids: Chosen, 1984), 42.

¹⁰ Jon Bloom, *Things Not Seen: A Fresh Look at Old Stories of Trusting God's Promises* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 85.