

## 5.

### Abraham's Great Sacrifice by Faith

By the time we come to the verses of Genesis 22, almost forty years had passed from the covenant confirming ceremony of Genesis 15. During that time, much had happened to both test and encourage Abraham's faith, as he experienced the Lord's covenantal faithfulness time and again. Abraham was tested by the threat of being murdered by foreign kings who would desire his wife, yet was encouraged by the Lord's deliverance and blessing of an increased flock and respect from those around him (Gen. 12:10-20; 20:1-18). Again Abraham's faith was tested by the existence of evil nations and the possibility of his nephew being caught up in their judgment. Yet his faith was strengthened in seeing God spare the righteous and destroy the wicked with awe inspiring power (Gen. 19:1-29). Once again Abraham's faith was tested by his impatient wife's strong desire for a child, which would result in disregard for the promise. Again he was strengthened through the God-wrought miraculous birth of Isaac, the child promised so long ago (Gen. 16:1-16; 21:1-6).

God is true to His Word. The Lord who had covenanted with Abraham is an infinitely faithful God and Abraham's life lesson that the Lord "is his shield, his very great reward" was being learned. But nothing that had occurred in the last forty years would compare to the great test Abraham was to endure. What Abraham could not foresee, and we can only know by hindsight, is that all along the Lord was preparing Abraham for his great test of covenant faithfulness. Abraham had seen the Lord's covenant faithfulness over and over again and now it would be time for the Lord to see Abraham's faithfulness to Him. It was time for Abraham to glorify God for the God that He truly is, and to manifest to all the world the faithfulness of the Lord. This was to be done in the only way that it could be done to maximize Abraham's faithfulness to the Lord, and at the very same time display, in the greatest way possible the absolute dependability of the Lord.

The word came to Abraham without fanfare and with stark simplicity, “Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about” (Gen. 22:2). In other words, “Abraham, go kill your son.” We are given no descriptions of Abraham’s anguish. Abraham simply did what he was told.

The whole account breathes of a powerful faith in action. Abraham had the presence of mind to instruct his son Isaac to help him with the preparations, and Isaac hadn’t a clue as to what was about to take place. This was a sign that Abraham, though no doubt a man experiencing internal struggle, was a man boldly intent on doing what he had been told. This was the polar opposite of Jonah, who, in Jonah 1:1, insanely ran away from God’s will for him.

Abraham was more like Jesus would be in his third and final year of ministry, heading for crucifixion in Jerusalem. Jesus was a man with internal struggle, no doubt, but you did not want to attempt to prevent Him from doing what he knew He had to do. Peter tried, and would regret it (Mt. 16:22, 23). Jesus was aggressively focused to perform what had to be done. This was how Abraham was in Genesis 22. God’s Word had come and there was only one way to respond to God’s Word when it came—it had to be done. It is impossible to believe that he would *not* have to plunge a knife into his son and then burn him as a whole burnt offering, because the text refuses us this strategy of downsizing Abraham’s faith and correspondingly downsizing the Lord’s faithfulness. The narrator is clear. He recorded that Abraham “took the knife to slay his son” (22:10). The Lord had to shout to prevent the slaying of Isaac because Abraham’s will was fully engaged to perform the act. Death to the one Abraham loved was imminent and Abraham’s faithfulness to the Lord rang through the universe! We stand back in astonishment at what Abraham would be willing to do. Abraham would be willing to do the unthinkable because his faith was in the unshakable faithfulness of the Lord.

In Genesis 22, we do not get insight into Abraham’s mind-set as to *how* Abraham would be able to kill his son, but we do in Hebrews 11. It is in Hebrews that we understand Abraham, spoken of in Genesis 22, to be a man of mature and time-tested faith. Abraham knew that the Lord was true to His word because he had experienced His faithfulness many times. God had promised many times, and by covenantal oath, that many descendants would come from the living bodies of Abraham’s descendants. So from this understanding, Abraham had reasonably concluded that he would kill his only son, Isaac, and

sometime afterward the Lord would raise him from the dead (Heb. 11:19). Isaac would die by stabbing and be burned into oblivion. But Abraham's belief was that God was so powerfully true to His Word, that no matter what was done to Isaac, he would live to bear descendants. Abraham understood Isaac to be invincible, not because there was anything special about Isaac, but that he was invincible because God's Word concerning him was invincible. Abraham believed God, so he was able to obey the unthinkable command. Abraham was faithful to His Lord to the uttermost, and in so being, he proclaimed the Lord to be faithful to the uttermost.

On Mount Moriah there was a festival, a climax of mutual allegiance. Abraham and the Lord shouting to one another in one magnificent and anguished moment - "Yes, I am yours!" "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not lay a hand on him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son" (Gen. 22:11, 12).

"Now I know," God said. However, we might ask, "But didn't God already know what was in Abraham's heart?" Yes, of course He did. But faith requires a demonstration, it must be seen. It must be shown to the world just like love in the heart must be expressed through word and deed. Our relationships require it. We cannot say we love our wives and then do the opposite of what love requires. It is in the doing that the saying becomes real. This is what James states about Abraham in his letter, "You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did" (Jas. 2:22). Faith becomes a justifying faith only when accompanied by action. For James it is not as though you lay actions next to faith, and the two added together save; it is that faith produces actions which in turn render faith to be real.

This is how James can say that it was not faith alone that justified Abraham, but that he was "justified by works," works that establish faith, as saving faith. It is through faith demonstrated that God is glorified as the God that He is; and it is faith demonstrated to the uttermost, to the loss of life if necessary that glorifies the Lord to be faithful to the uttermost. Nothing less than this is true faith.

In Genesis 22, Abraham was shown to be righteous by his supreme action. In Genesis 15, the Lord reckoned his faith as righteousness, because that is what Abram was being exhorted *to do*. To do otherwise in that moment would be to call God a liar as Adam had done previously. Now, in Genesis 22, the Lord reckoned Abraham's

obedience to the command as his righteousness, and it is on the basis of his faithful obedience that the Lord guarantees His faithfulness to Abraham:

The angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, “I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that *because you have done this* and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, *because you have obeyed me*” (Gen. 22:15-18).

God repeated the promise and it was upheld on the basis of Abraham’s obedience. The reason the Lord would deliver on His promise is *because* Abraham had been faithful to the Lord, even to the point of losing his one and only son. This is how James can describe Abraham to be “justified by works and not by faith alone.” Abraham was truly justified by what he did. The basis or ground of Abraham’s reception of the promise was obedience to a command. It is impossible to believe God and at the same time refuse to do what God commands. *This is true because the Lord does not grant the privileges apart from the keeping of the obligations.* The Lord Himself connects the promised privileges with the necessity of keeping the obligations.

Things could not remain the same with Adam *apart from* Adam’s obedience to the Lord. Likewise, Abraham could not expect to receive what was promised *apart from* doing exactly what the Lord told him to do, first in leaving Haran, then in sacrificing his only son. If he could receive what was promised apart from doing what the Lord told him to do, then Abraham’s obedience becomes optional. If Abraham could have been justified by faith alone and *apart from* obedience to his Lords’ commands, then Abraham’s behavior becomes incomprehensible. But we see from Adam’s experience that obedience was not optional, and we see from Abraham’s bold intention to do what he was told, that he was doing what he considered to be absolutely necessary. No father would do what Abraham was willing to do unless there was no other way.

Here we see all the elements of the covenantal relationship. Abraham, like Adam, had wonderful covenantal privileges from a gracious Lord. At the same time both had covenantal obligations that

had to be met. Abraham succeeded where Adam and Eve failed. How was Abraham able to keep the covenantal obligations? The only way possible, by trusting the Lord and taking Him at His Word. How was it that Adam and Eve failed? Adam and Eve failed because they believed the serpent and called God a liar. The Lord God keeps His promises. And because the Lord keeps His promises, Adam and Eve would surely die, but the descendants of Isaac would increase into a great nation indeed.

