

SESSION #9

As we move to the next part of Abraham's story, we find that...

“Faith is Put to the Test”

Charlie was one of Britain's most popular sports personalities of a previous generation. In a cricket-crazy society this young captain of the Cambridge cricket team was idolized by thousands. With his muscular skills, bright mind, good looks and wealthy family Charlie had an enviable future in front of him. But in an astonishing decision that shocked his late 19th century British society Charlie (C.T.) Studd sacrificed family, friends, fame and fortune to obey God's call to missionary service in China. Years later, after several terms in China, a stint in south India, and ministry in Africa, he died in relative obscurity in the Belgian Congo.

And we might ask, as many did, **“Was it worth it?”** Was it worth it to sacrifice so much that was precious – and legitimate – in order to obey God?

- the question arises in the story of Abraham too. It is clear that God **tests** His people concerning our willingness to sacrifice what is precious to us as an evidence of our loving obedience to Him. But He does so in the context of His faithful **provision** for us. As a result, the answer to the question “Is it worth it?” – in *our* lives – is a resounding “yes”.

- we've been following the story of Abraham from Gen. 12 through 21 and discovered that the plot moves from profound *tension* concerning the promised heir to unexpected *resolution*: Isaac is born to aged Abraham and barren Sarah
- but in the very next chapter the heir is placed in *jeopardy*, moving the tension to climax

Gen 21:34 - 22:2

And Abraham stayed in the land of the Philistines many days.

Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham,
and said to him, "Abraham!"

And he said, "Here I am."

² Then He said, "Take now 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."

[A. TESTING ABRAHAM'S FAITH]

1. the first thing we need to note is that God prepares

- this story takes place after “a long time” had gone by (21:34) and Isaac is most likely a teenager by now
- the intervening years as Isaac grew up must have been wonderful years of joy for Abraham, reflecting on God's promises and what they would mean for Isaac and future descendants
- God prepared Abraham by giving him some peaceful years of ‘tuning’ his heart closer to the heart of God as God matured his faith through these quiet years
- vs. 1 tells us that God “tests” but the context assures us that God also prepares us for His tests, sometimes by a peaceful, non-crisis rest in advance

2. the second thing we see is that God commands

- nevertheless, God's tests may come when we least expect them
 - vs. 2 comes like a bolt out of the blue to Abraham, and God's word shakes him to the core
- "Take now 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."
- we the readers are told this is a "test" of Abraham by God
- but for Abraham, he only knows that the command which comes now bears an eerie resemblance to the one which came for the first time 40 yrs earlier ("go...")
 - but *this* command now demands a kind of total commitment that is truly heart-stopping
- the **parallels** between the early verses of chap. 22 and the first verses of chap. 12 are instructive and important
- in both cases God uses a unique form of the Hebrew verb "**go**" which is not used anywhere else in the entire OT
 - furthermore, in the original call to Abram, God told him to "go" from (a) his country, (b) his people, and (c) his father's household
 - this time the command is connected to the verb "**take**" which also has 3 qualifiers: (a) son, (b) only son whom you love, (c) Isaac ...and "go"
- in Chaldea God had told him to go "to a **land**" which was **unknown** to Abram, and which God would "show" him
 - now God tells him to go "to a **mountain**" which again is **unknown** and which God would "tell" him about in due course
- in both cases, Abraham **obeys**
- so far, a significant series of important similarities – but there is **one major difference**: the earlier command was immediately linked to **promises** about the land & blessing
 - this time, the command simply stands on its own; there are **no promises** given yet
- back in chapter 12 we saw the **beginning** of Abraham's faith journey
 - in chapter 22 we see the **climax** & to a large extent the **conclusion** of his faith journey
 - James 2:22b tells us "his faith was *made complete* by what he did" in the story told here
- the original call had been for Abraham to leave his **past** – to let go of his familiar sources of security and trust God; it was a starting point for faith
 - but now, God calls Abraham to leave his **future** – to release the promises themselves...to give up Isaac, the 'son of promise'!
 - Ian Duguid said that sometimes "even the promises of God can become idols"
- in chap. 21 God had challenged Abraham's "backup system", Ishmael
 - now He continues to challenge/test Abraham's faith & obedience
 - ...does he trust *God alone*? – the focus of faith must be God alone, not His blessings and not even His promises
 - ...would he be willing to sacrifice Isaac, the prime object of his affection and the channel of God's promises?

3. the 3rd thing God shows us is the Tension of contradiction

- like loose strings on a violin, God – the Master Musician – now begins to tighten up the strings of Abraham’s life
 - this is going to create a sense of tension for Abraham; but without tension a violin cannot produce beautiful music
- the tension winds up rapidly right at the beginning, and it does so with a bewildering sense of contradiction:
 - the *promise* of God required Isaac to **live** – after all, God had said that it was *through Isaac* that Abraham’s “offspring would be reckoned” (21:12)
 - but now the *command* of God required Isaac to **die** – “sacrifice him as a burnt offering”
- God’s tests may **oftentimes not make sense** to us
- ...when faced with seeming contradictions like this in the Bible, or in our understanding of God, some people are tempted to abandon faith rather than persevere in patient faith to see how God will work it out
- very often there may be **no explanation** for this tension/contradiction apart from **waiting** (remember: *the flyer must never try to catch the catcher*)
 - we must learn to acknowledge that God is God and “His ways [are] past finding out” (Rom. 11:33)
- but in the waiting someone made this helpful suggestion: “Never doubt in the *dark* what God has told you in the *light*.”
 - Abraham had learned to trust God over the past 40 yrs and was able to act on this principle in the midst of his tense darkness

4. Trauma of testing

- but in the process of obeying God, Abraham still experiences a traumatic time of testing
- let’s read the story, this time in the NIV version...

Gen 22:3-11

Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. ⁴On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. ⁵He said to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.”

⁶Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, ⁷Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, “Father?”

“Yes, my son?” Abraham replied.

“The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”

⁸Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went on together.

⁹ When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.

¹⁰ Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!"

- the narrative presents a story of anguished faith with **dramatic intensity**
- even some of the **little details** point in this direction:
 - ...Abraham saddles donkey, collects his servants & Isaac and prepares for journey
 - and then finally he cuts the **wood**, "*enough wood for the burnt offering*" (as chap. 22 vs. 3 puts it, in the NIV version)
 - the most difficult thing is done last... there is a deep sense of emotional trauma – he obeys, but not without pain
- Martin Luther wrote a famous version of this story, which included this description:

"He took two servants and Isaac his son. In that moment **everything died** in him; Sarah, his family, his home, Isaac. This is what it is to sit in sackcloth and ashes. If he had known that this was only a trial, he would not have been tried. Such is the nature of our trials that while they last we cannot see to the end."
- Abraham doesn't see the outcome; he's in a dark tunnel of testing, and the pain is real
- in vs. 6 the "knife" is introduced specifically – and the sense of **drama** increases
- the mention of the "wood" at strategic moments also contributes to this dramatic effect:
 - the wood which Abraham "cut" in vs. 3 is placed "on his son Isaac" in vs. 6
 - and then as the story reaches towards its climax, Abraham places Isaac "on top of the wood" (vs. 9)
- inexorably the story presses forward to its culmination in vs. 10 when Abraham "*reaches out his hand and takes the knife to slay his son*"
 - ...this is a true test of a loving father in a real life-and-death situation
- but it is a **testing** not a *tempting*
 - Jerry Mixon wrote: "the devil tempts us to bring us **down**; God tests us to bring us **up**."
- and God's tests are for our benefit, designed to help us **grow** and mature, often in our most sensitive and **vulnerable** areas
 - for Abraham this area was his **love for Isaac** which could have displaced his love for God
- so God tests him to make sure that his **priorities** are still correct
 - in order to 'walk with God' and be known forever as the "Friend of God" Abraham must not let anything or anyone take the place God should rightfully occupy in his heart
 - someone said that "The essence of **idolatry** is to invest our ultimate hopes, dreams, and faith in something or someone who is less than God."

5. our concluding point here is: Abraham obeys

- in this 3-day journey of testing we get some glimpses of Abraham's **faith** along the way
 - eg. vs. 5... – Abraham tells his servants, "...**we** will come back to you"
 - in vs. 8... – he tells Isaac, "...God himself will provide the lamb" (a key phrase in the whole story)

- and then in vs. 10 his faith reaches a crescendo with his **unconditional obedience** –
“Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.”
- the NT provides a valuable comment at this point in the story
 - Heb. 11:19 in The Message translation - “*Abraham figured that if God wanted to, he could raise the dead. In a sense, that’s what happened when he received Isaac back, alive from off the altar.*”
 - it is especially impressive that Abraham believes God will **resurrect** Isaac even though there has never been a resurrection of anyone up to this time! – Abraham has never seen or even heard of such a thing before, but he believes God can do this if necessary (remember the Heb. 11:1 definition of faith: “the conviction of things *not seen*”)
- **obedience** = *faith in action*
- A.W. Tozer wrote: “*The Bible recognizes no faith that does not lead to **obedience**, nor does it recognize any obedience that does not spring from **faith**. The two are at opposite sides of the same coin.*”
- or as James put it in the NT:
“*Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his **faith** and his **actions** were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.*” (James 2:21-22 NIV)
- if we claim to have faith in God the only rock-solid evidence will be **obedient** actions
- Os Guinness said, “calling by its very nature reminds us that we are only followers of Christ when in fact we **follow** Christ – in other words, when we leave all other allegiances and walk after him, doing what he says and living as he requires. Jesus himself put the point bluntly to those whose deeds did not match their words: “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?” Christians who contradict Christ are Christians who are not following his call.” (The Call)

So... How do WE measure up?

- ...in the testing of OUR faith, do we respond with faith-filled obedience or with a kind of fatalistic resignation?
- Elizabeth Elliot, whose young missionary husband Jim was killed in 1956 by the Auca Indians, said:
“*Resignation is surrender to fate; acceptance is **surrender to God**. Resignation lies down quietly in an empty universe. Acceptance rises up to meet the God who fills that universe with purpose and destiny.*”
- faith in tough times involves an “acceptance” that “rises up to meet the God” who loves us enough to test us, refine us, purify us, mature us
- like Abraham, we too may be called upon to release our grip on the *promises* of God so that we may be pressed to Him alone
 - obeying God’s call to obedience will often require **painful sacrifices**; these will be different for each of us, but they could involve such heart-rending decisions as:
 - * breaking off **romantic relationship** because the other person is not a believer
 - in doing so we affirm that our primary affection for God means obeying Him over the natural dictates of our heart
 - * resigning from a **job** because of pressure to unethical or illegal behavior

- in doing so we affirm that our economic security is in God's hands not in the company's paycheck or pension plan
- the **process** may be **painful**, but the end result will be blessing for us & glory for God
 - His ultimate purposes with us are not to produce pain but to produce people of godly character