

Sermon — New Hope Bible Fellowship Worship Service — Sunday March 1st, 2020

Faith Like Abraham's

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Hello friends! Today I am going to talk about faith. The suffering of faith, the joy of faith, and what God is looking for when he commands us to have faith.

The past two weeks have been the climax of a personal trial of faith, one that has reached a temporary conclusion. And it is that experience that has led me to my meditations on the greatest trial of faith ever endured and what it has to teach us about the journey of faith.

The story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac has generated no shortage of praise and critique over the years. Jews and Christians have looked to Abraham as an example of uncompromising obedience and submission to God, while others have looked on in horror at the idea of a God who would demand the sacrifice of a child.

Indeed, the drama of the story lies in the seemingly incongruity between the character of God as presented in Scripture with the very command he gives to Abraham. And in that disconnect lies the necessary insight for understanding this difficult passage.

First, we note that elsewhere in Scripture human sacrifice is expressly forbidden and is named as detestable in God's eyes [Lev. 20:2, Deut. 12:31]. And we see from our story that God has no intention that any harm will come to Isaac. Even though Abraham is willing to kill him God stops him from doing so. Therefore, we certainly cannot use this text to even remotely consider the appropriateness of human sacrifice or child sacrifice.

But although child sacrifice is unthinkable for us today, it was not altogether unthinkable for Abraham. He lived in a cultural context where human sacrifice, although uncommon, was nevertheless one of the ways one sought to seek favor from the gods. And it was generally accepted that gods of fertility had a right to the first share of the crops, whether that be plant or animal life, and yes, on rare occasions, even human life. And unlike us, Abraham did not have access to the rest of the Bible or the centuries of Jewish and Christian thought to guide him. Heartbreaking as it must have been for him, he would not have found it incomprehensible for God to ask something like this of him.

Having said that however, there is more than enough in Genesis and in the very words of our passage to suggest that despite that little piece of historical-cultural insight God's command would have seemed nonsensical to Abraham. A closer look at Abraham's journey up to this point will help us get at just how counter-intuitive God's command would have seemed.

In Genesis 12, God calls Abram, commanding him to leave his father's house and promising that he will make him a great nation. As Abram obeys and journeys to the promised land, he goes through various trials and challenges. When God continues to reassure Abram of his promises, Abram responds that all God's promises won't mean anything unless he's able to have an heir. Furthermore, when Abram tries to fix the problem of Sarai's barrenness himself, by having a son with Sarai's servant Hagar, God refuses to

allow Ishmael to live under the covenant blessings but insists that Abraham will have a son from Sarah instead. And indeed, at a ripe old age Sarah conceives and gives birth to Isaac!

So at the time of our story it is important to remember that for Abraham, his entire relationship with God has been based on this promise of being made a great nation on this land, which lies in his son Isaac. Not only that, but because of Sarah's jealousy he has sent away Hagar and Ishmael, so that literally the entirety of God's faithfulness to his side of the covenant lies is embodied in his son Isaac.

But Abraham is certainly not worried about having all yes eggs in one basket, for he has seen God deliver him from trouble over the years and prove himself trustworthy through the miraculous birth of Isaac. So he can go to the grave content and satisfied. And at the end of chapter 21, Abraham has just made a treaty with King Abimelech, ensuring his rightful place in the land of Canaan. Everything is good, secure, fulfilled. And then the test comes.

So the question for us is: if Abraham killing Isaac is against God's moral character (as the rest of the Bible says), if God has no intention of any harm coming to Isaac, and if Isaac himself is the embodiment of God's own covenant promises to Abraham, then why does he command Abraham to sacrifice Isaac and want him to be willing to go through with it? To Abraham, it must have seemed not only cruel but in direct contradiction to everything on which his relationship with God has been based. What is so important about Abraham's response that it is worth the emotional distress to Abraham and to poor Isaac?

Various suggestions have been offered over the years, including:

As a foreshadowing of Jesus death and resurrection (we'll get back to this).

To demonstrate how Yahweh is actually different from local deities by NOT requiring Abraham to go through with the sacrifice.

To allow Abraham to witness for himself how far he's come in his faith.

To give Isaac a first hand experience of the faith of his father and the character of God.

However, although none of these are entirely wrong, the text in fact tells us why God does what he does. In verse 12, the Lord calls out and after stopping Abraham from completing the deed, declares, "for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." Later on in the passage, as God is spelling out the great blessings that will result, he specifies that it is because "you [Abraham] has obeyed my [God's] voice." God's purpose is to determine Abraham's unconditional obedience, an obedience that chooses to obey, even in the face of every seeming contradiction and personal loss and suffering that results from doing so.

Put another way, Abraham was willing to lose everything, including everything that God himself had promised him, because of his unwavering trust and obedience to God. Crazy though it may seem, the more interesting question is why does Abraham have such a relationship to God? How did this man come to such a place of unconditional obedience to his God?

Again, we look back at Abraham's entire journey of faith, from his earliest days until his test of faith. Abraham at first takes a huge risk by leaving everything he's known, the only family he's known, in order to travel to a strange land that God will show him. Through all the twists and turns, he has seen God protect him and guide him.

On more than one occasion, Abraham gives into his fears and compels Sarah to lie regarding their relationship, putting his wife in a very difficult situation and God has to intervene to save her. Contrary to God's command that he should not bring any other family members on the journey, Abraham takes Lot with him, and despite his best efforts, things do not turn out well for Lot. Giving in to impatience and the urging of Sarah, Abraham agrees to fathering a child with Hagar, the servant, and it results in turmoil in the home and trauma to Hagar and Ishmael and Abraham's loss of a son.

Finally, after decades of waiting, Abraham sees God come through on his promise by providing him a son, and in a way that brings an extra measure of joy and vindication, as Isaac came to him in a way that made it clear that it was God who was miraculously blessing Abraham and Sarah. In so doing, God had proven himself lord over all aspects of life and death. And as previously mentioned, right before the big test Abraham has cemented himself in the land promised by God by making peace with all his neighbors.

At the end of chapter 21, right before God tests him, Abraham plants a tree in Beersheba and called on the Lord, the Everlasting, or Enduring God. So we see that Abraham has reached a place in his journey of faith where he has come to know God in a richer, deeper and more assured way than before. He has seen God come through on his promises, and he has seen God work out all the many complicated situations of his life for good. Furthermore, Abraham has experienced the damage that results when he tries to do things his way, when he tries to manufacture the circumstances by which God should work.

Abraham has seen that God does indeed know best, for him and for his family, and that God does truly wish to bless, but in his time and in his way. Abraham's faith journey has brought him to a place where he can truly say, in all things, your will be done, not mine.

But having said all that, we must observe that in this event Abraham is being tested in a way that he has not been before. All his previous tests concerned Abraham's confidence that God would come through with the blessings He had promised him. But here he is asked to give all that up, simply because God commands it. He is offered no explanation but is presented with a dilemma and a question: does he obey God for the benefits, or because he is committed to a relationship of complete trust and dependence? Even if obedience and trust means great pain and loss? Can he really say, in that dreadful moment, your will be done?

Incredibly, Abraham says yes, even though he doesn't understand why and it causes him immense grief. He will sacrifice Isaac, and risk losing everything of personal value in his relationship with God. And because he does so, he passes the test. There is nothing he will withhold from God, not even that which is most precious to him, even that which God himself has promised to him.

Genesis also shows us another dimension to Abraham's faith. His faith is not just a matter of resignation, of acknowledging that God is God and he is not. After all, many other people have come to the same conclusion through the pain and calamity that they have endured. God is God, he can do what he wants, and I am not. Oh, and also, He's an uncaring tyrant. It would have been easy for Abraham to go this way, and for many of his contemporaries, that was probably how they viewed the gods. Inscrutable tyrants, always demanding sacrifices and using human beings for their own ends. His willingness to sacrifice Isaac is therefore not unique in this sense.

No, what separates Abraham's obedience and faith from the rest is his conviction that despite the seeming incongruity of the command, and the pain and trauma to him and to Isaac, God will provide—or a better

translation would be, “God will see to it.” Somehow, this will work out together for good, including for him and even for poor Isaac. He doesn’t understand how, but because of who he knows God to be, Abraham believes that death and loss will not be the final outcome. This is expressed in his words to Isaac in verse 8, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” Along with his readiness to relinquish everything is also the conviction that because God is gracious and all-powerful, God can and will restore what is lost. And in the conclusion of the story, Abraham’s belief is vindicated in the provision of a ram for the sacrifice in place of Isaac.

Friends, here we find the paradox of faith. God is both the tester and the provider. As Walter Brueggemann has said, God is shown to be freely sovereign just as he is graciously faithful. Abraham comes to an awareness of these two marks of God encountered together in tension. God gives and takes away and is in his rights to do both.

God demands complete surrender to him. He cannot be controlled. Abraham cannot pretend to be willing to sacrifice Isaac, assuring himself that God is gracious and would never actually require him to do it. No, he must be actually willing to lose Isaac and all that he represents. But likewise, God desires that he does so in faith that God will somehow use this for good, that God is not a cruel God for making such a demand. That one will gladly continue trusting and following him regardless.

As Christians we live with this tension every day. We are tempted and tried, and although we are taught to pray that God would keep us from the day of trial, we nevertheless must be prepared to face them. It is then that we discover what our faith is really made of. Do we follow God for the benefits? If we demand that God owes it to us to bless us, then God is our servant, not our Lord.

Conversely, do we obey God outwardly but secretly believe God to be a tyrant, an unreasonable arbitrary judge who just keeps demanding more and more of us? That may be obedience or submission but it is not faith, at least not faith like Abraham’s.

Christ gives us a picture of both. In Gethsemane and on the cross we find a picture of complete surrender to God’s will, obedience unto death. But we also find a picture of trust in the goodness and wisdom of God, a trust that is vindicated in the Resurrection. We are invited to have the same kind of faith: readiness to suffer and give up everything for God, with the assurance that God will make all things right. And we can have this kind of faith because we saw it not only in Abraham, but in our savior Jesus Christ, and so we can confidently follow in his footsteps.

Which brings me back to my personal trial of faith these past couple weeks. As many of you know, I have been on a long journey these last few years. I had devoted much of the last 12 years to ministry and was now pursuing a PhD in the conviction that this was how I could best serve God and what he called me to. I had put everything I had into that dream, and these last two weeks it appeared that not only did all the doors close, but that God had gone out of his way to close them. Despite being a strong candidate, Wheaton selected another applicant that seemed to be tailor made to be a more accomplished version of myself. The other U.S. schools also did not accept me, and given that I had tailored by application process most to Wheaton I was not feeling very confident about the others. So earlier this week I spent a morning really wrestling with God in prayer, resigning myself to the fact that perhaps this simply was not the way God wanted me to go, in spite of the ways I had been led up to this point. But that was the faith of resignation, and it seemed that I was being asked to not just accept God’s withholding, but to choose to believe in God’s goodness and wisdom in the face of impending deep personal disappointment.

I was resigned to going back to my parents' house in Toronto without any further plan, calling my old supervisor to ask for my old job back, right back where I started. A long obedience with great perseverance and trust in God only to not have any of the blessings he promised. And as I finally accepted that, not begrudgingly, but with humble belief that somehow God will still work this out for my good, that I looked down at my phone, and I had just received the following email: "Congratulations, the Toronto School of Theology is pleased to offer you admission into the Doctor of Philosophy in Biblical and Theological Studies."

This week has been a real-life lesson in the costs and the rewards of faith. The mystery of the God who demands all and gives all.

So I don't know what you are going through personally right now, what trial of faith you are going through. I can only say, along with Abraham, that "God will see to it". It may not even be in this life, many of us will endure losses that are only repaid in heaven, but I believe that God gives us glimpses of his great wisdom, love and power here and now; in small ways, like he did for me; or in big ways, like he did for Abraham.