

Abraham's Trial of Faith

Abraham, without doubt, was one of the great heroes of the Bible. His name is mentioned in 25 of the 66 books of the Bible. He is listed in Hebrews, chapter 11, in that great chapter which has appropriately been called "faith's hall of fame." In fact, on three separate occasions he was described as the "*friend*" of God, James 2:23; Isa. 41:8; 2 Chron. 20:7.

There are several reasons as to why Abraham was such an important biblical character. It was to Abraham that God made the great promises recorded in Gen. 12:1-3 — promises that included the Jewish nation descending from him, and ultimately even the coming of Jesus Christ, Gen. 12:3; Matt. 1:1; Gal. 3:16. In fact, all people today who belong to Christ, who are "*in Christ Jesus*," are described as "*Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise*," Gal. 3:28-29.

Indeed, so much is recorded in the Bible about the person and life of Abraham. However, this article primarily deals with what has appropriately been called "Abraham's trial of faith," as it is so vividly described in the 22nd chapter of Genesis.

The Story as it Unfolded:

1. The time period. It was "*after these things*," Gen. 22:1, specifically, the "*things*" recorded in the previous chapter, a chapter which informs us of the birth of Isaac, when Abraham was 100 years old, Gen. 21:5, the casting out of Hagar and Ishmael, Gen. 21:10-14, and after Ishmael (who was 14 years older than Isaac, Gen. 16:16; 21:5) had grown up and married, Gen. 21:21. It was also after Isaac had grown up sufficiently to carry the "*wood*" that was to be placed on the "*altar*," upon which he was to be "*laid*," Gen. 22:9.

2. "God tested Abraham," Gen. 22:1. The KJV says that God "*did tempt*" Abraham. Of course, God does not tempt man with evil, Jas. 1:13-15, but God does test people, and by so doing, it enables their faith to grow stronger. Cf. James 1:2-3.

3. The Command. God commanded Abraham, saying, "*Take now your son, your own 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 will tell you*," Gen. 22:2. Regarding this command we note two important items: (a) It was emotionally difficult, for God said "*take...your son Isaac, whom you love*," and "*offer him as a burnt offering!*" (b) It did not make sense, especially in view of the promise stated in Gen. 21:12, wherein God said to Abraham, "*in Isaac your seed shall be called*."

4. Abraham's Response. "*He rose early in the morning, and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac, his son; and he split the wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him*," Gen. 22:3. There was no hesitancy, no delay. Abraham took no time whatever in trying to figure out "why" God gave him such a command. When they arrived at their destination, Abraham said to his young men, "*stay here with the donkey; the lad and I will go yonder and worship, and we will come back to you*," Gen. 22:5. He knew that for him to offer his son as a "*burnt offering*" would demand that he take the life of his own son; however from the New Testament we learn that he believed that "*God was able to raise him up, even from the dead...*" Heb. 11:19. Hence, in saying that "*we*," referring both to himself and Isaac, "*will come back to you*," Gen. 22:5, he was expressing his unquestioned faith in God, that He would honor his previous promises. Herein we note the calm obedience of Abraham; he went through all the required steps, fully intending to do everything God commanded.

5. The Question of Isaac. He said to Abraham, “*Look, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering,*” Gen. 22:7. Isaac, no doubt, had seen enough offerings in the past to know that something was missing. Little did he realize, at that point, according to the previous command, that **he** was to be the sacrifice offered! But, to Isaac’s credit, there was no complaining, or resisting on his part. He allowed himself to be “*bound*” and “*laid...on the altar, upon the wood,*” Gen. 22:9, the “*wood*” which **he** had carried! The fact that Isaac was old enough to carry the wood, and old enough to reason with his dad regarding the object to be offered, proves that he was not a small child (as so many have conjectured). This says much about how he had been raised up to this point in time.

6. The divine intervention. At the precise time when Isaac was laid upon the altar, and Abraham “*stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son,*” the “*angel of the Lord called to him from heaven... and said “do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him,”*” at which time “*Abraham lifted his eyes and looked, and there behind him was a ram caught in a thicket by the horns,*” so “*Abraham went and took the ram, and offered it up for a burnt offering instead of his son,*” Gen. 22:10-13.

7. God then renewed his promise to Abraham, Gen. 22:16-18, a promise renewed, “*because,*” as God said, “*you have obeyed My voice,*” Gen. 22:18.

The Application for Us:

The events cited above belong to that part of the Bible which was “*written for our learning,*” Rom. 15:4. Indeed, there are many lessons from Abraham’s example which we today would do well to learn, but we will confine our remarks to four important lessons.

1. True faith does not question God! After all, God’s “*thoughts*” and “*ways*” are as much “*higher*” than our thoughts and ways as “*the heavens are higher than the earth,*” Isa. 55:8-9. God has His reasons for what He commands; it is our duty to obey His commands, **not** to question them! Abraham did not just believe “*in* God;” he “*believed God,*” Rom. 4:3! Consequently, he was “*fully persuaded that what He (God) had promised He was also able to perform,*” Rom. 4:21.

2. It helps us when our faith is tried. Consequently, we are told to “*count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of you faith produces patience,*” James 1:2-3.

3. Genuine faith must be accomplished with complete obedience. In the New Testament we are told that “*faith without works is dead,*” and then the writer cited the example of Abraham who was “*justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar,*” James 2:20-21. Abraham was then cited as one whose “*faith was made perfect*” when it was accompanied “*by works,*” referring to the “*works*” of obedience to God, Jas. 2:22. And then he said “*the Scripture was fulfilled*” (referring to “*the scripture*” previously cited in Gen. 15:6) which says “*Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness,*” Jas. 2:23. Hence, for this reason he was “*called the friend of God,*” Jas. 2:23.

4. God always gives back more than he asks of us! God spared Isaac, and gave him (completely unharmed) back to his father. God then promised great blessings to Abraham, saying: “*blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies, In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed*”

My voice,” Gen. 22:17-18. Yes, He requires our complete devotion, Matt. 22:37, and if we long for salvation we must obey Him, Matt. 7:21; Heb. 5:8-9; Rev. 22:14. But think of what God gives in return! Upon obedience to the gospel, by grace we receive (not earn!) “*the remission of sins,*” Acts 2:38; we are “*added to the church,*” Acts 2:47, which is the “*one body*” wherein both Jews and Gentiles are reconciled to God, Eph. 2:16; we are adopted as God’s children, Eph. 1:5, thus becoming “*heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ,*” Rom. 8:16-17!

Concluding Remarks

We sing the song, “God is so good.” Indeed, He is! God provided a lamb in the place of Isaac, so that Isaac could be spared. However, He “*did not spare His Own Son, but delivered Him up for us all...*,” Rom. 8:32! Indeed, Jesus is “*the Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world,*” John 1:29. However, though Jesus “*died for all,*” 2 Cor. 5:15, He “*became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him,*” Heb. 5:9. Friend, do you have the kind of faith Abraham had? If you do, you will learn what God requires of you, you will believe what God had revealed in His word, and you will obey God with neither hesitation nor equivocation.
—Bobby Witherington