

# The Faith of Abraham

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As the Scripture tells us in 1 Corinthians 10, the contents of the Old Testament were written beforehand for our instruction. Often, as in the specific case of the children of Israel in the wilderness, this instruction is negative in nature. Paul explicitly says in that context that we need to learn what they did so that we don't do the same thing. However, the instruction provided by other Old Testament stories is quite positive. This evening, let's look at one of those stories: the story of the faith of Abraham.

## God's Covenant with Abraham

During our time together this evening, we're going to be examining four different contexts from Genesis that illustrate the importance of faith in Abraham's life. The first of these describes God's covenant with Abraham. The story begins with **ABRAHAM'S BELIEF** in God's promise. Read with me from Genesis 15:1-6. To understand what's going on here, first we must appreciate Abraham's problem. Even today, couples who want to have children but aren't able to produce them struggle with their childlessness a great deal. 4000 years ago, that grief was even more pronounced. The people of Abraham's time had only a shadowy conception of life after death. Primarily, they looked to live on through their children, but Abraham's childlessness denied him that consolation. When God promises Abraham a great reward, he essentially replies, "I don't have kids, and I'm not going to have any. What does it matter?"

In reply, God promises Abraham that he will have a son from his own body, and that through that son, he will have offspring as countless as the stars. Even though Abraham knows that his wife is past the age of childbearing, he believes God, for no better reason than that it is God who is making the promise. In response, God reckons Abraham as righteous, counting him as justified in His sight.

This short encounter is the blueprint for our relationship with God today. Abraham believed the promise of God, and God counted him as righteous on the basis of faith. Today, we are likewise justified because we believe in God's promise of forgiveness through Christ. None of us can hope to establish our own righteousness through perfectly keeping God's law, but because of our faith, God considers us righteous. As we'll see from the story of Abraham himself, this faith must be united with obedience. Faith that does not obey is no more useful than the belief of the demons in James 2. However, even while we highlight obedience to the gospel, we must remember that it is God who saves us, and not we ourselves.

The text next describes **ABRAHAM'S REQUEST**. Let's look now at Genesis 15:7-11. There are a couple of issues here that are worth exploring. First, we must ask why God is not displeased by Abraham asking Him for a sign. Why isn't that putting God to the test? After all, in Luke 1, Zacharias makes a similar request, and for his sign, he is struck dumb until his son is born. I think the difference between the two stories lies in each man's reason for asking. We've seen already that Abraham believed God even before the sign was granted. He wanted the sign only to confirm his faith. On the other hand, Zacharias didn't believe the angel, and his request for a sign was an expression not of faith, but of doubt.

The same applies to our study of the Bible today. We can approach God's word in faith, look to it to confirm what we believe, and find what we seek. On the other hand, we can come to the word with hearts filled with doubt and demand that the Scripture dispel our doubt. I've had plenty of kitchen-table studies with people holding both of these viewpoints, and I can nearly always tell which one they hold. Those who approach the Bible with a doubting heart will ask different questions in a different tone and will respond differently to the answers I give. They're looking for reasons to disbelieve, and at least in my experience, they always find what they're looking for. Sadly, in so doing, they ensure that they won't find their way to God.

Second, Abraham's seemingly strange decision to chop the sacrificial animals in two and lay the halves in rows reveals a peculiarity of the culture of the ancient Middle East. In any language, certain verbs and objects go together. We speak of brewing coffee, not infusing it, even though we know that coffee particles are being infused into the water. In the same way, in Hebrew, the verb that goes with "covenant" is "cut". In Hebrew, you cut a covenant. Abraham's practice here shows the origin of the idiom. Back in the day, when you made a covenant with somebody, you cut a bunch of animals in two, with the implication being that if you broke the covenant, you should be cut in half just like the animals. The Mosaic covenant

was sealed by the cutting of circumcision. Our covenant with God is sealed, Paul says in Colossians 2, by the removal of the body of the flesh, by Jesus cutting off our sins from us.

In the remainder of Genesis 15, we see **GOD'S ANSWER** to Abraham's request. Consider Genesis 15:12-21. First, He explains at greater length His promise of the land to Abraham's descendants, that the promise will only be fulfilled after those descendants have been enslaved for four hundred years. Then, God ratifies the covenant Himself by causing a torch and an oven to pass down the aisle between the halves of the animals. Today, we're used to the idea of the Israelites spending 400 years in bondage. When we take into account the lives of the three patriarchs, God is telling Abraham that it's going to be about 600 years before his descendants take the land. Because it happened so long ago, we meet it with a shrug.

However, to Abraham, this would have been anything but shrug-worthy. How often do any of us think about what will happen 600 years, or even 400 years, in the future? Could a man who lived in Jamestown in 1614 have predicted modern-day America? We would be unimaginable to him, just as the state of mankind 400 years from now, if indeed the earth even still exists, will be unimaginable to us. However, God reveals His certain knowledge of these things, and they happen precisely as He predicted. Even today, we serve a God who knows the end from the beginning. He is not controlled by time; instead, He controls it.

### **The Offering of Isaac**

After God fulfills His promise by causing Abraham's son Isaac to be born, their story concludes with the story of the patriarch's willingness to offer his own son. This comes about, not because of some derangement on the part of Abraham, but because of God's decision to **TEST** him. We read about this in Genesis 22:1-8. First, let's note God's precision in what He says to Abraham. He tells Abraham that he is to sacrifice his only son, the son whom he loves, Isaac himself. There is absolutely no wiggle room in this commandment. There is no loophole that would enable Abraham to track down Ishmael, or some other son whom he had conceived along the way, and offer someone other than the son of promise as the burnt offering. Only Isaac's offering will please God.

The awfulness of this command is obvious to every parent in the room. I can scarcely bear the thought of one of my children dying at all, much less the thought of me killing one of them! If possible, though, this commandment is even more burdensome to Abraham. After all, this is the miracle boy, the child of a couple incapable of having children, the delight of their old age. Abraham probably would have sacrificed everything he owned to save Isaac. Instead, he is to sacrifice Isaac.

Under those circumstances, most of us would have been tempted to hem and haw and put off the horrible event as long as possible. Not so with Abraham. He rises early the next day to begin the journey to the mountain of Moriah, which is the mountain where the temple of Solomon would be built in about a thousand years. Abraham also doesn't try to thwart God's plan passive-aggressively. He begins the journey with two servants, but he leaves them behind on the third day, probably so that they don't try to stop him from killing his only son. He even has what must have been a heart-breaking conversation with Isaac, in which Isaac tries to figure out what is going on, and Abraham puts him off with an evasive reply.

The point here is plain. God is not always going to ask of us things that are easy. Indeed, He may call us to service that we find heart-wrenching, unfathomable. It's hard for all of us to do what God wants, but for some, it's **REALLY** hard, so much so that we assume, for instance, that a man in an unscriptural marriage would rather not hear the gospel at all than be confronted with the truth that he doesn't have a right to his wife. We must never forget, though, that faith obeys. Faith might struggle, faith might hurt, but faith obeys. Faith that doesn't obey isn't actually faith at all, because if we truly believe that God is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him, then nothing else can be more important than that search.

The next section of the story describes **GOD'S PROVISION** of a different sacrifice. Look at Genesis 22:9-14. I don't know about the rest of you, but I find the first few verses of this difficult even to read. It must have been unimaginably painful for Abraham to take his only son, tie him up, place him on the altar, and raise his knife to kill him, fully expecting to follow through. From Hebrews 11, we learn that Abraham was so confident in the promises of God that he expected God to raise Isaac from the dead after he had sacrificed him. Even with that confidence, though, who of us could go through with such an act?

At the last possible moment, though, the angel of the Lord stops Abraham before the fatal downward stroke. God gives him a ram to offer in place of his son, so that Abraham's evasive reply becomes

the truth. God did indeed provide. I think God's comments on all this are fascinating. He says that now He knows that Abraham fears Him. On one level, this makes no sense. After all, isn't God omniscient? Didn't He already have complete knowledge of the hidden depths of Abraham's heart, even before He imposed this harsh test on him?

Here, as is so often the case in the Bible, I think there is a difference between knowing with the intellect and knowing by experience. It's one thing for us to read about someone else's tragedy. It's another thing entirely for us to go through that same tragedy ourselves. According to Hebrews 5, even Jesus learned obedience from the things which He suffered. God knew Abraham's faith before, but now He *knew*.

As a consequence of this, God swears **AN OATH** to Abraham. We read the details in Genesis 22:15-19. This is important. God makes a lot of promises, but He doesn't swear very many oaths. Off the top of my head, the only other one I can think of is when He swears to Jesus that Jesus is a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. Perhaps the difference between this new oath to Abraham and the many similar promises that God had made earlier is that promises are conditional, but an oath isn't. God makes all kinds of promises to Christians today, from the promise of eternal life on down. However, all of those promises depend on our faithfulness to God, and if we aren't faithful, God is not obliged to bless us regardless. I suspect that if Abraham had refused to obey God in Genesis 22, his disobedience would have voided all the promises that God had already made to him. However, once God swore an oath that Abraham would become the father of numberless descendants, it was certain to happen, as indeed it has.

However, there is one unique aspect to the oath that God swears here, something that He had not previously promised. It is what we often call the seed promise, that through a singular offspring of Abraham, all the nations of the earth would be blessed. I don't think Abraham had the foggiest idea what God was talking about, but to us, the meaning of this is quite clear. It is a prophecy and oath that Jesus the Messiah would come from the lineage of Abraham, as indeed, 2000 years later, He did.

I don't think it's a coincidence that God swears this particular oath here. After all, Abraham has already shown his willingness to offer his only son to God. Who better, then, to be the ancestor of Jesus? Who better to participate in God's plan, in which the Creator would offer His only Son for us? We can never be deserving of the sacrifice of Christ, but the faith of Abraham and all those like him showed God that such a sacrifice would not be in vain.