

“Abraham’s Faith (Part 3)” – Hebrews 11:8-19

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July 28, 2019

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Take a Bible and meet me in Genesis 22...

To begin, I would like to read the verses we explored last week and then review some of the lessons we previously considered and add to them several others. To that end, let’s look at the text, beginning in verse 1. The most important thing for you to understand this morning is what I am about to read to you now. This is God’s Word...

“After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, ‘Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’² He said, ‘Take 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.’³ So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him.⁴ On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar.⁵ Then Abraham said to his young men, ‘Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.’⁶ And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together.⁷ And Isaac said to his father Abraham, ‘My father!’ And he said, ‘Here I am, my son.’ He said, ‘Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?’⁸ Abraham said, ‘God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.’ So they went both of them together.⁹ When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.” (Genesis 22:1-9)

Let’s review for a moment what we have covered so far in our sermons from these verses...

Abraham’s Unforeseen Circumstance ***God Tests People of Faith***

Abraham’s Unconditional Obedience ***People of Faith Obey God***

Faith Is Marked by Humble Submission
Faith Accepts Both Promises and Commands
Faith Seeks Understanding Through God’s Word
Faith Does Not Require All Explanations

Now I would like to add another lesson to these...

Faith Is the Root and Obedience Its Fruit

Faith and obedience go together, but we sometimes get them in the wrong order. The root of faith is what produces the fruit of true obedience. This is why people of faith obey God.

So let's have a look at what this text teaches us about the nature of faithful obedience, not legalistic obedience. This is obedience that flows from faith. First of all...

Obedience Should Be Prompt

One of the lessons that I'm trying to teach my children is that I don't consider delayed obedience to be obedience. I'll say to my son, "Asher, please take your shoes and put them in your room." He moans and groans because he doesn't want to stop what he's doing. What could have taken 15 seconds ends up stretching to 5 minutes with a few emotional breakdowns in between. Instead of walking, he will throw himself on the floor and slither toward the bedroom. Of course, instead of grabbing both shoes he only had one so the whole process has to repeat itself.

When a kid does something like that and they get in trouble the response is the same—"I did what you asked me to do, didn't I?" And, of course, the answer is "No!" In their mind, as long as they eventually do the task it should be counted as obedience no matter how long it takes. But that's not how parents reason. I expect my children to do what they are told when they are told. When they stretch a task that should take one minute into an hour of talking under their breath in protest, that's not obedience. That's drama. Obedience involves more than outcome. It should be marked by promptness.

What a contrast with what we see in Abraham here. We are not told of any emotional angst or frustration, only of the immediacy of his obedience.¹ I'm not sure what's more shocking—God's command to offer up Isaac or the immediacy of Abraham's compliance. "We know that grace had visited and transformed the heart of this man, or he would not have been able to react as he did."²

Verse 3 tells us that "*Abraham rose early in the morning*" to make preparations and begin the journey of his obedience. No hesitation. No equivocation. No stalling. The command of God comes and Abraham gets up at the crack of dawn to obey. All of us would have understood if Abraham delayed in his obedience. Who could blame him? We would likely have delayed as long as possible ourselves. "But that only shows how inferior our idea of obedience is to his."³ Postponed obedience is not obedience. Delayed obedience is disobedience. It is, at best, the mark of a childish faith or, at worst, the absence of faith altogether. When God makes known His will we should say with the Psalmist, "*I hasten and do not delay to keep your commandments*" (Psalm 119:60).

Why do we struggle with that? There are a number of reasons. One of the reasons relates to one of the things we considered last week—we don't have all the answers to our curiosities. God gives an instruction that we don't understand so we delay because we want explanations first. He says "Go" and we want to have a conversation about "Where?" before we begin the journey. But that's usually how God operates. Walking by faith presupposes that not all your curiosities will be settled. If all our curiosities were removed, we would be walking by sight, not faith. You won't always (even usually) know what God is up to, but that's no excuse for delay.

Notice that God instructs Abraham to go to "*the land of Moriah,*" but doesn't tell him the exact mountain yet. That comes later. God assures him that He will reveal the spot to Abraham, but the man doesn't need that information yet. This is a good reminder for us. We need to step where God reveals and obey in what we know. Then, and only then, does God often reveal the specifics we are so curious about.

I have been pastoring since 2002 (ironically, the church I pastored then was called Mt. Moriah Baptist Church) and the number one thing people want to come talk to me about is God's will for their life. Am I supposed to marry this person? Should I go to this school or that school? Should I take this job or that job? What is God's

will? After a while you begin to notice that when people are seeking “God’s will” what they really mean is they are trying to figure out the future. They think of God’s will as some mysterious and hidden thing that unlocks the door to the life we always wanted. Yet that’s not really the way the Bible talks about God’s will.

The Scripture’s tend to speak of God’s will differently than we do. We almost always speak of God’s will as a future pathway. The Scriptures hardly ever do. “Instead,” as Jerry Sittser explains, “the Bible warns us about anxiety and presumption concerning the future, assures us that God is in control, and command us to do the will of God we already know in the present.”⁴ In other words, the Bible tends to speak of God’s will as something that is already revealed.

We have God’s will for our lives outlined in this book, the Bible. It tells us what Jesus was like and how we are to emulate Him. It shows us the character that should mark the citizens of God’s kingdom. We may not know what we are supposed to do in that big choice we will be confronted with months down the road, but God has already made known to us the kind of man or woman He wants us to live like today. As we faithfully obey those instructions for today, then we can rest assured that we will be where He wants us tomorrow. Do God’s will today. Trust God for tomorrow.

“God has been clear where clarity is most needed. The choices we make every day—to love a [person] after an argument, to treat an unkind coworker with respect, to serve food at a soup kitchen—determine whether or not we are doing the will of God. If we have a problem, it is not a lack of knowledge; rather it is our unwillingness to respond to knowledge we have...how we choose to live every day creates a trajectory for everything else. Perhaps that is why the Bible says so little about God’s will for tomorrow and so much about what we should do to fulfill his will today.”⁵

There is so much passivity in the Christian life that goes under the guise of “God hasn’t made it clear yet.” Don’t delay obedience in what you know, just because you don’t know everything that tomorrow holds. Abraham didn’t know the specific mountain, but God had revealed the region. “Maybe you have not scaled your mountain because you haven’t made it into the region.”⁶ Are you in the region of obedience? Then maybe that explains why the mountain God has for you tomorrow seems so opaque today.

Obedience Should Be Comprehensive

Notice how detailed Abraham was in the execution of his obedience. Verse 3 tells us he preps the donkey for the commute. He gathered the people required. He cut the wood to fuel the offering, which means he would have had to look at his son to determine how much wood was required to offer up his son. He’s applying himself to even the most grotesque details. Abraham is doing everything necessary to make sure his obedience is carried through to completion. When our time of testing comes, our obedience should be just as thorough and comprehensive.⁷ And, related to this, we are reminded that...

Obedience Should Accept Responsibility

All of this is happening at Abraham’s responsibility. Others are involved to the degree necessary, but he is the one taking responsibility for his own obedience. When they came upon the place that God reveals, then he alone takes the boy up the mountain. Verse 5 tells us that he leaves the two young men behind and says, “*Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.*” He refuses to ask them to do the dirty work of his obedience. He takes responsibility. And so should we.

Obedience Should Be Sustained

It took three days for Abraham to reach his destination (22:4).⁸ It must have felt like an eternity. He had plenty of time to think. Plenty of time to get cold feet and change his mind. So what was it that pushed this broken man up the mountain? Are we to imagine this man pressing forward like “the Little Engine That Could”—“I think I can. I think I can. I think I can.” Was he saying to himself, “I can do it, because this is all about my obedience. I can do it. I must do it. I will do it”? Nope. That’s not the chorus of faith. It sounds more like this: “God will do it. God will see it through. God will provide the lamb.”⁹

You will recall that last week we considered a few biblical things that suggest that Abraham expected that God would come through by means of substitution or even resurrection. God had promised so many things that related to Isaac that Abraham reasoned that Isaac still had a future. So it’s not, “I can do it. I got this.” It’s “God will have to do it. You’ll have to be faithful.” Abraham’s hope is in God alone. And his confidence in the promises of God exceeded his need for explanations from God. So he moved forward in faith. He persevered. For three days he kept walking and didn’t turn back.

This is a point that Christians today in our cultural setting need to take note of for “it is our habit to begin to do things but then to drop them quickly.”¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, of all people, once coined the phrase “a long obedience in the same direction.” Eugene Peterson once wrote a book with the same title. The Christian life calls for the kind of stamina. Unfortunately, this is not in vogue in our day, especially in a setting such as ours. As Peterson writes,

“We assume that if something can be done at all, it can be done quickly and efficiently. Our attention spans have been conditioned by thirty-second commercials. Our sense of reality has been flattened by thirty-page abridgements. It is not difficult in such a world to get a person interested in the message of the gospel; it is terrifically difficult to sustain the interest... There is a great market for religious experience in our world; there is little enthusiasm for the patient acquisition of virtue, little inclination to sign up for a long apprenticeship in what earlier generations of Christians called holiness.”¹¹

As Christians we are in it for the long run. And if this is true, then our obedience should be marked by a resolute persistence. The Christian life is a race. It’s a marathon. And we must adopt the mindset of the Apostle Paul: “*forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus*” (Philippians 3:13-14). When we begin to obey, we must see the thing through.

“How many of us have committed ourselves to a step of faith, but on the three day journey we turn back? With time to think, with time to find a way out, we didn’t stay the course... But on that day Isaac [would discover] Abraham’s God in a way that he had never done before. Why? Because Abraham kept on.”¹²

It is hard for us to imagine how difficult that may have been for Abraham. But it clearly demonstrates another characteristic of true obedience, namely:

Obedience Should Trump Feelings

The late Elisabeth Elliot—widow to Jim Elliott, one of the most famous martyred missionaries—once told the story of an experience she had while visiting some shepherds in Northern Wales. She noticed that one shepherd was picking up the sheep and submerging them into a vat of antiseptic. It was explained to her that this process was necessary so that the sheep would not be eaten alive by parasites. Each sheep took the same bath and each sheep fought against its shepherd with all its strength. But the shepherd kept dunking the sheep and holding them under.

In the process she caught herself wondering what it must be like to feel like your shepherd was trying to kill you. Then it dawned on her. She knew that feeling quite well. Her life had been far from easy. There were seasons where it felt as though God was working against her. Surely Abraham could relate. Genesis 22 reminds us that sometimes it may feel like our Shepherd is trying to kill us when in fact He is working to save us.¹³ So what does that tell us? It tells us that we can't trust our feelings.

Why would you ever give your subjective feelings priority over God's objective Word when Jeremiah tells us, "*The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?*" (Jeremiah 17:9). No wonder the book of Proverbs says, "*There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death*" (Proverbs 16:25). Just because something seems right, just because it feels right, just because you have a "peace about it" in your heart, doesn't mean it won't destroy you in the end. So don't trust your feelings. Check your feelings against God's Word and let what God has said cast the deciding vote when the two conflict. If Abraham had trusted his feelings, he never would have left Beersheba. He would have avoided Moriah like the plague. And, in so doing, he would have missed out on God's amazing provision.

Obedience Should Focus on God

We saw this last week, when we considered Abraham's strong faith in the character of His God. Abraham believes that God is faithful to His promises and therefore could be trusted. So Abraham is keeping His eyes on God. And evidence of Abraham's orientation is seen in his words to the servants in verse 5—"*Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.*" What does he tell them he is going to do? Worship. Was he being disingenuous? Absolutely not. His whole obedience in this matter is an act of worship.

Here again we see a subtle distinction between obedience that God desires and the faux-obedience that is commonly mistaken for the real thing. Following the letter of the law is not necessarily obedience. It could just be legalism. In God's eyes, motives matter. Begrudging submission is not the same as willing obedience. Obedience is worshipful when it is carried out in response to who God is and what He has done. That is worship. Not everything that masquerades as obedience is worship. But true obedience should always be an act of worship, which means it will be God-centered, it will focus on God more than it does on us.

Perhaps the reason you have not been all that settled in your obedience is because your mind is not all that fixated on God. Are your eyes ever focused on yourself? Does the world have your gaze? If so, then worry will be more natural than worship and obedience will be shallow at best. We must start thinking about our obedience as an act of worship because God does (Romans 12:1). This is why Jesus said, "*If you love me, you will keep my commandments*" (John 14:15; cf. James 2:21-24).

So we must worship. We must preach to ourselves who God is and what God has done and respond accordingly. This is what will settle us in a world full of uncertainties. Worship carries us through. Godward focus sustains us. As John Newton once wrote,

He cannot have taught us
To trust in his name,
And thus far have brought us
To put us to shame.
For each Ebenezer
We hold in review
Confirms his sure purpose
To bring us safe through.

That is God's purpose for His people—to bring them safe through. Our deliverance may often come *through* the trial and testing more than it comes *from* it, but God, our Shepherd, isn't trying to kill us. He means us well. He desires to conform us “*to the likeness of his Son*” (Romans 8:29). He desires to “*keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy*” (Jude 24). He desires to purify our faith (1 Peter 1:6-9). He desires to perfect our character (James 1:1-4). He desires to protect us from sin (2 Corinthians 12:7-10). It is vital for us to know this. “Knowing this, and reminding ourselves of this, will keep us settled in our obedience. It will assure us that God knows what He is doing and is working wisely through whatever trials or difficulties come into our lives.”¹⁴

So if obedience should flow out of our Godward worship, then it's easy to see why the Gospel is so essential for God's people to meditate upon. In the Gospel we see a Savior—Jesus Christ—who was perfectly obedient to all the commands of God. He experienced all of the temptations we have experienced (and even more) and never once fell into sin. His track record was perfection. He is the only human this could ever be said of and so He is the only person who did not deserve to die and experience God's condemning wrath.

Yet, for our sakes, He offered up His life on the cross so that the punishment we deserved as sinners would fall upon Him instead. Every ounce of God's wrath that we deserved was absorbed by Him. He died. But three days later He was raised victorious over sin and death. And because of that glorious substitution we can be saved if we will trust him—turning from sin and resting our faith in Him alone.

When we embrace this truth, this Savior, by faith our sins are forgiven and we are credited with His perfect record of righteousness. So we are accepted by God as though we had obeyed like Jesus. What good news! And this is what motivates our worship and our obedience. We don't obey to earn God's favor. We obey with joy because Jesus has earned God's favor for us. As we focus on God and what He has done for us in Christ, we will find worshipful obedience growing in our lives.

But before we consider how this story anchors us to that Gospel thread that holds together the pages of your Bible, let me mention one additional point about obedience...

Obedience Is Often Contagious

What I mean by this is that it goes beyond Abraham to his son, Isaac.¹⁵ We find the father's faith alive and well in the son. Why would I say this? Because “Abraham could not have offered Isaac without Isaac's consent and cooperation.”¹⁶

The text doesn't really tell us how old Isaac was. When I was a new Christian I always visualized him as a young child. But verse 6 tells that the task of carrying the wood up the mountain fell to him. So he is, in all likelihood, at least a teenager. Some Jewish tradition argues that he was in his thirties, given some of the details in the next chapter.¹⁷ I don't think he was that old. But he's not a young child. He's old enough to carry the lumber and young enough to still be called a “lad.” He's probably a teenager.

Furthermore, Abraham is not a young father. He was a hundred years old when Isaac was born. Isaac's was a miraculous birth, as you'll recall. Add to that the years that Isaac has grown up and you are left with a very old father, older than anyone you've ever known. Perhaps you have had the privilege of knowing someone over the age of one hundred. There's a certain kind strength that they exude. But it's not an imposing strength. It's not the kind of strength that could subdue a boy in the prime of life. Isaac is stronger than his father, which is why he carries the wood. He is faster than his father. It's reasonable to assume that he would have no trouble resisting and subduing his father.

And yet, in verse 9, he finds himself bound at the altar. How do we explain this? Most scholars explain it as willing submission. One author puts it like this:

“Apparently Isaac had decided to obey his father whatever the cost, just as his father had decided to obey God whatever the cost. Perhaps Abraham persuaded Isaac by rehearsing the story of his son’s supernatural birth and then by enumerating the reaffirmations of the great promises to him and therefore reasoning that God would have restored Isaac to life, even though his body was reduced to ashes. The father’s faith was alive in his son!”¹⁸

The father’s faith was contagious. The son, like his father, may not have understood why God would call for his life on the altar, but he trusted his father and he trusted his father’s God. In faith, he was likely called to surrender and submit to this sacrifice every bit as much as his father. As verse 8 tells us, they were in this together. If this is correct, then the story is as much about Isaac’s faith as it is Abraham’s.

David Platt has pointed out that there are textual reasons to conclude that the story may be more about the son than it is the father. How many times do we see the son mentioned in Genesis 22? If you were to circle the references, you would find eleven references in the span of just fifteen verses. Three of those references stress the fact that Isaac is the “*only son*.” The text is very concerned that we keep our eyes on the son.

Then at the climax of the narrative we come to verse 10.

“Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, ‘Abraham, Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ ¹² He said, ‘Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.’ ¹³ And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴ So Abraham called the name of that place, ‘The LORD will provide’; as it is said to this day, ‘On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.’”
(Genesis 22:10-14)

And now we come to...

Abraham’s Undeserved Providence ***God Gives What He Requires***

This is what we will consider next week as we wrap up our study of Abraham. This is my favorite part, the part where we ask, “What does this text teach us about Jesus?” and we get to see the picture of the Savior embedded in this Old Testament text. I can’t wait! Be sure to make it next week. And bring a friend!

Let’s pray...

¹ Gordon J. Wenham does wonder if there is a slight hint sorrow numbing his mind given that the order of actions is as it was—first saddling the donkey and only *then* cutting the wood. See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1994), 114.

² Paul David Tripp, *New Morning Mercies* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), May 26.

³ James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 704. Boice also writes, “This was apparently a great characteristic of Abraham’s life and is undoubtedly an important secret to his spiritual growth. After Abraham had been told to circumcise all the males of his household, ‘*On that very day* Abraham took his son Ishmael and all those born in his household or bought with his money, every male in his household, and circumcised them, as God told him’ (Gen. 17:23, italics mine). After God instructed him to send away Sarah’s slave Hagar and Hagar’s son Ishmael, ‘*Early the next morning* Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He set them on her shoulders and then sent her off with the boy’ (Gen. 21:14, italics mine). It is the same in Genesis 22. Immediately after being instructed to offer his son as a burnt offering, ‘*Early the next morning* Abraham got up and saddled his donkey’ (v. 3, italics mine). Throughout his long life, Abraham could have been saying, as the psalmist later said explicitly, ‘I will hasten and not delay to obey your commands’ (Ps. 119:60).” *Ibid.*, 703-704.

⁴ Jerry Sittser, *The Will of God as a Way of Life: How to Make Every Decision with Peace and Confidence* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000, 2004), 22.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 25. Two other books I would strongly recommend on this subject are: Kevin DeYoung, *Just Do Something: A Liberating Approach to Finding God’s Will of How to Make Decisions Without Dreams, Visions, Fleecees, Impressions, Open Doors, Random Bible Verses, Casting Lots, Liver Shivers, Writing in the Sky, Etc.* (Chicago: Mood Publishers, 2014); Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Discovering God’s Will* (Banner of Truth, 2013).

⁶ Alistair Begg, “Faith Put to the Test, Part Two,” a sermon accessed online as of April 24, 2019 at: <https://www.truthforlife.org/resources/sermon/faith-put-to-the-test-pt-2/>.

⁷ Thabiti Anyabwile, “Genesis 22,” a sermon accessed only as of April 24, 2019 at: <https://resources.thegospelcoalition.org/library/genesis-22>.

⁸ “In the biblical world, three days was a typical period of preparation for something important (for example, Genesis 42:17-18; Exodus 19:10-11; Numbers 31:19; Esther 5:1; Hosea 6:2; Matthew 12:40; 1 Corinthians 15:4).” Tremper Longman, Consulting Editor, *Layman’s Old Testament Bible Commentary* (Uhrichsville, Ohio: Barbour Books, 2010), 46.

⁹ Timothy J. Keller, “Real Faith and the Only Son,” in *The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive* (New York City: Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2013).

¹⁰ Boice, 704.

¹¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1980), 11-12.

¹² Alistair Begg, “Faith Put to the Test, Part One,” a sermon accessed online as of April 24, 2019, at: <https://www.truthforlife.org/resources/sermon/faith-put-to-the-test-pt-1/>.

¹³ Keller, “Real Faith and the Only Son.”

¹⁴ Boice, 706.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 707.

¹⁶ R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning and Blessing* (PW; Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004), 303.

¹⁷ Wouldn’t it be interesting if he was the same age as Jesus offered Himself as a sacrifice for our sin?

¹⁸ Hughes, 303.