

THE WAY OF FAITH, PART 1: ABRAHAM SADDLES UP

Hebrews 11:6; Genesis 22:1-4 (NASB)

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"Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, 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'" (Genesis 22:1-2).

In two verses we go from warm toward God to cool. *Really?* we think. *What does this episode have to do with my walk of faith?* And then we fear the answer, and fight the urge to stick our fingers in our ears to block out the voice of God. The very idea of human sacrifice sends a bucket of ice water down our spine. This command of the Lord resounds in the ears of every parent as the most unacceptable thing God might ever say. *Don't make me do this!* we either think to ourselves or, if bold enough, we speak back to God.

But let us all exhale for a moment. What if this story, rather than prove the skeptics' charge that the God of the Old Testament is a violent, bloodthirsty, heartless God instead speaks into our lives the most important things God ever has to say about the way of faith? What if world-shaking eternal matters for every person hinge on getting past our understandable feelings of outrage? What if there are things in God's kingdom which must happen which cannot happen any other way?

I've been a pastor for thirty years or so, preaching continually every Sunday, leading prayer meetings every week, teaching Sunday school, running youth group, leading worship band, writing theological papers, running outreach, counseling, administrating, budgeting—you name it. Tell me how I can generate a mass movement of prayer in Christ's church. Tell me how to get us all to own church evangelism, personal holiness, regular Bible reading, strong families, community involvement, and alertness to the signs of the times. Tell me how I can get resistant people to trust Christ for salvation.

Surely the bookstores are full of books on these subjects, and I have read many of them. But against the advice of many of the "how-to" books and seminars stands a concrete word spoken by Christ: **"With people this is impossible..."** (Matthew 19:26a). That sounds discouraging! That means that all human efforts to produce the kingdom of God in ourselves and others are like a car with no linkage between the steering wheel and the tires, no connection between the accelerator and the fuel system, and no hydraulic line between the brake pedal and the calipers. Jam the throttle all you want! Yank the wheel over hard and imagine yourself skidding sideways like in the movies! Tromp the brake and hope for a squeal of rubber. It won't happen. It can't happen.

But then comes Christ's encouraging follow-up: **"...But with God all things are possible"** (Matthew 19:26). That sounds better! At least we now know that to get anything done in God's kingdom, we must work with God, for it was Christ who said: **"I will build my church"** (Matthew 16:18). But how do we, with no connection between the steering wheel and the tires, work with God to get things done? The answer to that question is found in the theme verse for this study series, Hebrews 11:6: **"And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that**

He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him." Once we accept that the kingdom of God will not steer, brake, or accelerate at our command, we become ready to accept how it actually moves forward: by faith in God's working, and in no other way.

The story of Abraham's sacrifice of his son, Isaac, explains to us what God is willing to do to evoke from within us genuine faith. Without it we all wander this world in the grip of the devil, we live in slavery to our evil desires, we drown in the futility of our minds, we destroy ourselves and the people around us--and then we go to hell. This study will show how Abraham walked the way of faith and how we can, too.

SUBMIT YOUR HEART TO THE LORD

First, we cannot even begin on the way of faith without submitting our hearts to the Lord. Abraham's story begins with the call of God: "**Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am'!**" (Genesis 22:1). At first blush it sounds like Abraham was just telling God: "I'm over here!" But that is not the ancient Near Eastern use of the phrase: "Here I am." It would be as if someone asked us to do something and we would say: "At your service!" In other words, "Whatever you ask I will do."

These were the exact words of Samuel the prophet when he was still a boy serving in the temple: "**It happened at that time as Eli [the priest] was lying down in his place (now his eyesight had begun to grow dim and he could not see well), and the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD where the ark of God was, that the LORD called Samuel; and he said, 'Here I am.' Then he ran to Eli and said, 'Here I am, for you called me.' But he said, 'I did not call, lie down again. So he went and lay down'**" (1 Sam. 3:2-5). The Hebrew for "Here I am!" is a single word, *hinneni*, which means "Behold!" It bespeaks the presentation of the servant to his master. And it was, in fact, the Lord calling Samuel.

This should be the steady state condition of the person of faith, namely, a peaceful, soft heart toward the Lord in his sovereign oversight of all things. It is a prerequisite to the first step on the way of faith, because without this submission of the creature to the Creator we will not rouse ourselves to respond. Do we really think that God is God? Have we accepted the definition of the word Almighty? Until we do, there is no point in speaking of the way of faith.

This attitude of humble submission was painted in the starkest of outlines for the whole world to see, as Paul wrote, "**Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men**" (Phil. 2:5b-7). And then Paul admonished: "**Have this attitude in yourselves...**" (Phil. 2:5a). Be like this! the Lord says, not only by command but by example. When the Lord calls your name in the dark reaches of the night, what will be your answer? Decide in advance that the only proper response to the God of the Universe is: "*Hinneni!*" "Here I am—at your service, Lord." So said Abraham when the Lord called his name.

HEAR THE CHALLENGE

Into Abraham's attitude of service the Lord spoke the following unbelievable challenge: "**He**

said, **'Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, 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). As readers of the word of God we have an advantage over Abraham because we know that this challenge came to him as a test of his faith. But the challenge came to Abraham without that tipoff.

Realize that Abraham had left his country behind with his status and comfort, he had faced famine, he had gone to war to rescue his family from the pagans in the land, he had suffered the loss of his son, Ishmael, and many other things. Isaac, the child of God's promise, had become his pride and joy. And then the Lord asked him to sacrifice his beloved only son. Not only was the earthly love for his son at stake, the entire plan of world redemption seemed to be threatened. It was a challenge which appeared to be designed by God to make no sense to Abraham, the believer.

But our tests of faith often come to us in the same way. Does God really want us to have a serious illness, the loss of a loved one, a financial reversal, or a broken family? Without getting into a long study of the different aspects of the will of God, we can simply say that no, none of these things please the heart of God.

So why does he permit them? The evoking of faith from every person trumps all other considerations. Without faith it is impossible to please the Lord, it is impossible to be saved, it is impossible to walk with the Lord once saved, and it is impossible to advance God's kingdom. God knows this better than any of us, and the intensity of this challenge to Abraham's faith tells us just how far the Lord is willing to go to evoke faith in each one of us.

In the Lord's wisdom, this instruction to sacrifice Isaac went right to the core of Abraham's faith issues. It would be the place where Abraham would think: *Lord, I will give you everything—but not this!* Every one of us has some cherished thing about which we think the same way. At that very point we are in danger of deciding that we will trust God thus far but no farther. We risk becoming double-minded about the Lord, which is a faith condition which the Lord evaluates as total failure, as explained by the apostle James: **"... The one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways"** (Jas. 1:6b-8). "Half a loaf is better than no loaf," as the saying goes, but in the matter of faith, a half-hearted faith is catastrophic.

So hear the Lord's faith challenge as it comes to you. It may seem outrageous, uncaring, and senseless. Why does God simply not shut down the things which break our hearts in this life? Because the entire plan of redemption, from eternity to eternity, hinges on the genuineness of our faith. For those of you who think theologically, this in no way affirms the concept of synergism, that man contributes to his salvation. It is a recognition that **"without faith it is impossible to please the Lord."**

SADDLE UP

The first evidence we have of Abraham's faith response is at the beginning of the next verse of the story: **"So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey..."** (Gen. 22:3). "Saddling up" is a proverbial way to describe the inward resolve to move forward. Abraham revealed no dragging of feet, no half-hearted faith, as he rose early and saddled his donkey.

I confess that I am beggared or words at Abraham's response. He had evidently come to the place of abandonment long before this particular challenge. He knew that it was God or nothing. Over the years I have broached this issue with pastors who were being disciplined for moral or spiritual failures. Restoration is possible only for those who see that it's Jesus or nothing. We all preach this, but the simple fact is that only real tests call forth faith from us. Hypothetical ones do not. And until we are the ones facing the impossible test by the hand of the Lord we will never really find out if we genuinely believe that Jesus is our only hope.

So prepare yourself in advance. What will you do when the pincers of divine providence squeeze you into something you never wanted to face? Will you say: "**As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord?**" Or will you find yourself in the company of the tens of thousands of professing Christians in America who back away from the faith each year because it seems too hard? I advise you to set your alarm clock and check your tack so that when the challenge comes you will get up early and saddle up to follow the Lord.

UNDERTAKE THE WORK OF FAITH

If saddling up is the inward resolve in the way of faith, there is yet the outward expression of work toward the goal of faith. And let there be no confusion, it is work indeed, as Abraham's story reveals: "**So Abraham 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 wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him**" (Gen. 22:3). It is one thing to embrace the challenge of faith inwardly, but the time comes to throw our energies into it.

Imagine the inner turmoil this would have generated in Abraham. Not only was he asked to sacrifice his son, but he was asked to do it by his own hand. Beyond preparing the donkeys for travel, he had to gather the sacrifice kit of freshly split wood, kindling, ropes, knife, and who knows what else. Imagine, for example, the process of selecting the knife in Abraham's mind: *Well, I have knives for eating, for slaughtering animals, for tanning hides, for smoothing wood, for cutting hair—which one would be suitable for sacrificing a son?*

The Lord's tests of faith are not armchair experiences. In order to walk the road into the unknown with the Lord we have to work, sometimes very hard. Why would God do this to us? Because, James wrote: "**For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead**" (Jas. 2:26). The works James urges upon the faith are the acts of obedience which are an integral part of actually believing God. Do we really believe God if we will not lift a finger? No. The way of faith requires work toward a goal which may not be in evidence at all. Abraham chopped wood.

PREPARE FOR A LONG ROAD

As the final thought on the way of faith for this study, we see that God chose to build the challenge of perseverance into this test of faith. We have already seen that the Lord did not begin by specifying the destination, just the region of Moriah. And then, as Abraham moved forward on the way of faith, he discovered that it was a long walk: "**On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from a distance**" (Gen. 22:4). How far could you go on a donkey in three days? Maybe fifty or a hundred miles. There was no possibility of getting this act of sacrifice over quickly.

The way of faith requires us to settle in to a lifestyle which is dependent entirely upon the Lord. We may travel for a day or ten days or a year or a lifetime, and whatever duration the Lord chooses we go there with him.

For example, career missionaries often take about ten years to prepare for the field, and sometimes longer, without even knowing if they will be appointed. What if an illness comes upon us and there is no speedy way to cure it? What if family struggles go on and on and bring stress to us? What if we undertake our ministry in the will of the Lord and discover that the weight of it threatens to flatten us, and the squashing just won't quit? Abraham walked the long road without quitting, without knowing what would happen, and did it while not even wanting what looked like was going to happen.

If we have correctly perceived these five truths about the way of faith, then we have at least an outline of how to answer the questions I posed about ministry at the beginning of this study. How do we get a movement of prayer among us? How do we bring about any positive motion for the kingdom of God on the earth? We will have to grow accustomed to walking this path where the trip is as important as the destination. For God will do anything to evoke genuine faith. Our knowledge of his agenda, even if it frightens us with its severity, gives us a chance to pass the test. And the test is for one purpose: to make the way of faith our way.

As we face the future in our personal lives, have we made the way of faith our way? Is the way of faith the way of our church as we seek to expand the kingdom of Christ on the earth?

I am praying, and asking all of you to pray, that we will confront our future together in the Lord by adopting the way of faith. This is no simple matter, because it is completely unnatural in the human. As the Lord Jesus said: "**With people this is impossible...**" (Matt. 19:26). To say it another way, nothing God wants from us can happen purely by human strength and wisdom. We will have to trust him—for all of it.

I invite you to take a journey of faith with me to see what God will do as we face the tests of faith he brings our way. May it be that the story of our local church will not be that we took our human resources and did great things for God. May our story be that we gave God our all in settled, well-contented faith and by so doing saw God do marvelous things to glorify his name on the earth.

You may have been going through this study and realized that you have not yet made the first step in the way of faith. You have two choices. You can face the overwhelming challenges of life on your own, or you can go through them in the care of a God who is looking out for you at every point. Don't get this wrong! Join the way of faith by confessing your sins to God. Receive the forgiveness which is yours by virtue of the fact that God actually went through with it and sacrificed his only Son so that you might not perish, but have everlasting life (John 3:16).