

The Life Of Abraham Sacrifice of Faith, learning to give all (Genesis 20 to 22)

*[Please note : sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
English Standard Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Please can I welcome you all to this talk from *Truth for Today*, where we are continuing with our series on the Life of Abraham where the talk today is entitled “the Sacrifice of Faith”. Last week we learned from chapter nineteen, how Abraham’s kinsman, Lot, escaped from the terrible judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah, solely because God remembered Abraham. Today’s talk covers chapters twenty to twenty-two, beginning with a lapse of faith when Abraham persuaded his wife to say she was his sister. We shall look at the details in a moment, but I want to state that Abraham had already made a similar mistake, that we can read about in chapters twelve and thirteen of Genesis. Lot went with him, when Abraham travelled to Egypt, and thus began the journey that eventually found Lot in Sodom.

As C.H. Mackintosh points out in his *Notes on Genesis*, there is, in this chapter, an illustration of Abraham’s lack of faith and trust in God that caused him to grievously err. Why did Abraham act as he did when he moved away from the great trees of Mamre to sojourn in Gerar? It appears as though he was terribly frightened of the people of the land:

“And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, ‘She is my sister’. And Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah. But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, ‘Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man’s wife’” (Genesis 20:2-3).

The two words in this extract that charm me are “**but God.**” In the midst of the chaos, caused by Abraham’s faithless fright, God steps in to prevent the possibility of sin. How many times has God intervened in a situation that seemed hopeless? I was reading recently of Darlene Rose, a young American missionary to New Guinea, who was imprisoned by the Japanese Army in the Second World War. Enduring horrific conditions that included torture, beatings and starvation, she never stopped believing in the love of the eternal God, so I quote from her book *Evidence Not Seen* :

“I was alone and I had time to weep, but with the tears came healing. In my moment of terrible aloneness and sorrow for a world of people so devastated by war, I heard someone with a beautiful clear voice singing, “Precious Name, Oh how sweet” outside of my cell, but he was singing in Indonesian... My heart burst with bright hope! The “time to weep” was past; it was “time to laugh” ...but who was the singer? I scrambled up to the lintel. No one by the door, no one in the courtyard other than the guards and they were totally ignorant of the singing. Listening to this hymn of hope and assurance coming from I knew not where, great awe filled my heart. I slipped to the floor and bathed my soul in the presence of God.”

When years later, she recounted this experience to Dr A.W. Tozer, he asked her if she never thought that God had sent an angel. I trust that we listening today accept the Scripture that tells us that (... **angels are ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation**) (Hebrews 1:14). As Bev Shea used to sing “When Jesus comes, the tempter’s power is broken and the tears are wiped away.”

The intervention of God in Abimelech’s life, through a dream, was a salutary lesson for Abraham, which to my mind achieved its purpose. Abraham had to be reminded that God was in total control. We can see this from chapter twenty and verse seven, when the LORD spoke to Abimelech:

“Now then, return the man’s wife, for he is a prophet, so that he will pray for you, and you shall live. But if you do not return her now know that you shall surely die, you and all who are yours.”

From this verse we learn that Abraham was a man who prayed. At other times in his pilgrimage we find Abraham interceding with God. Possibly one of the most well-known occasions is when he was pleading for Lot in chapter eighteen. Our chapter ends with a further example of the power of Abraham’s intercession.

“Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, and healed his wife and female slaves so that they bore children. For the LORD had closed all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham’s wife” (Genesis 20:17-18).

How undignified and unworthy that such a man as Abraham crumbled before the reputation of Abimelech, a pagan king. If only he had committed his way to the LORD in prayer, he would not have conjured up the devious plan that was not worthy of his status as a man of faith. The story of Abraham and Abimelech contains a timely warning to all of us not to walk by sight, but by faith. We cannot leave this chapter without a final comment of how Abraham prayed and God healed the king and his people of their infertility, a miracle that also removed the stigma, as many considered it of childlessness. A miracle in anybody’s book! There is more that we could say about chapter twenty, but we must move on to consider chapter twenty-one.

The first eight verses of this chapter set before us another miracle involving fertility, the fulfilment of a divine promise that we looked at some weeks ago, in chapter fifteen.

“The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised. And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him” (Genesis 21:1-2).

Other scriptures such as Romans 4 verse 19 and Hebrews 11 verse 11 emphasise that the birth of Abraham’s son, in Sarah’s old age, was against nature and, therefore, was a miracle. When such an event was prophesied to Sarah she laughed in disbelief.

“The LORD said to Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now I am old’? Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you about this time next year, and Sarah will have a son” (Genesis 18:13-14).

There is a question in those comments by God to Abraham, that I want to highlight, because it is salient advice for us in our age. “**Is anything too hard for the Lord?**” The question must be answered by us, not only by Sarah, for we know her answer. When we are faced with a dilemma, do we turn to the Lord with assurance seeking His will? We need to be reminded that our God is

not too small. Don't judge Sarah, for she must have resigned herself that it was not God's will for her to have the joyful blessing of motherhood. That she and Abraham were going to be the progenitors of a great people was now naturally impossible.

We find it convenient to balk at difficulties in our pathway, or claim that circumstances of our pilgrimage are impossible to overcome. It was impossible for a woman, turned down by a missionary society, to go to China under her own volition and preach Christ, in addition to looking after many children when the country was at war, but Gladys Aylward did it! It was impossible for a nation to be fed with manna, every day as they travelled through the wilderness, yet it happened to the Israelites! It was impossible for George Muller to house and feed the orphans of Bristol, yet he did just that! I would suggest that we need to continually trust in God, for when we walk in His will nothing is too hard for Him.

Something of the thrill and fulfilment that this new-born child meant to the aged Abraham and Sarah is gained as we look at the response from them both. Sarah this time laughed with joy, while Abraham, enraptured at the turn of events, called his son's name Isaac, which means laughter (Genesis 21:3). Like many couples, the birth of a child completed their relationship. Abraham also provides us, at this time, with an example of the obedience of faith:

“And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him” (Genesis 21:4).

Abraham's obedience is witnessed by his conformity to God's instructions given in Genesis 17, when he was told to circumcise every male child on the eighth day. Faith is involved because it was a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham. Scripture would teach us, that despite some lapses, Abraham was always responsive to the leading of God. He was promised a land, yet he never owned anything other than the field of Machpelah. So great was his faith, it caused him to be known in Scripture as the friend of God. What comes through most clearly, however, when we study the life of Abraham, is God's patience and grace in His dealings with the patriarch, when he wandered away from the divine path. Because of time limitations, we must move on to consider chapter twenty-two, which concerns the offering of Isaac. But before we do so, can I tell any who might have just joined us, that you are listening to a broadcast by *Truth for Today*, on the life of Abraham.

I have just glanced at my watch and feel that we can, quickly, look at the two incidents in chapter twenty-one that we have not yet considered. Verses nine to twenty-one concern Hagar and her son, Ishmael. He was born some years before Isaac which meant he considered himself to be in line for great wealth, as the eldest son of Abraham.

“And the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing. So she said to Abraham, ‘Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac’” (Genesis 21:8-10).

So great was his distress, that Ishmael could not conceal his dislike for his younger brother, who was the centre of attention on this day of celebration. Strangely, in view of the happiness suggested by the laughter of Sarah, when Isaac was born, Ishmael's laughter seems to be a sign of mockery. His general insolent attitude caused Abraham to take sides with Sarah, meaning that Ishmael and his mother are turned out of the house into the wilderness with very little sustenance. Owing to the grace of God they find a well that enables them to survive. In Galatians chapter four, the Apostle Paul uses this incident to illustrate the difference between law and grace, but that is for another time. The second incident in chapter twenty-one is the reappearance of Abimelech to negotiate an arrangement with Abraham about a well. Access to water was extremely important to the herdsmen, who had sheep and goats to care for, in addition to their families. Abimelech's

servants had stolen a well that rightfully belonged to Abraham. Something of the power, wealth and influence of Abraham can be traced in the way the dispute was resolved but before we leave Abraham at Beersheba we must not fail to mention his actions there:

“Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba and called there on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God” (Genesis 21:33).

Beersheba was where Abimelech and Abraham completed their negotiations and marked the occasion by swearing an oath, an act which gave the place its name, Beersheba or the well of the oath. I am more interested in concentrating upon the verse above so that we might notice the title given to God. Abraham called upon the Everlasting God. Nothing temporary or limited by time in the LORD. Enosh was the first man in Scripture who called upon the Name of the Lord, just as Abraham was doing here. I trust we all know the sweetness of that name.

We have now reached chapter twenty-two, which is obviously a major confirmation of Abraham’s pilgrimage and faith in the living God. He had once left Ur of the Chaldees not really knowing where he was going. Now, as we shall see, he faced the acid test.

“After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, ‘Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here am I.’ 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” (Genesis 22:1-2).

When I was at a College of Education, I heard it said that it was morally wrong for God to demand such an act from one of His people. God did not require such a sacrifice, as we learn when we take the story as a whole. As George Henderson has written, “The sacrifice of Isaac was commanded at first, and forbidden at the end.” The word translated “tested” means to “prove”. We have seen that when Lot was asked to choose which direction to take, he made the wrong choice and ended up in Sodom. If he was walking by faith and not by sight, he would have turned away from the well-watered plain to seek God’s mind. If we had continued to read Genesis twenty-two, instead of stopping at verse two, we would have found that Abraham obeyed immediately the command of God. There was no waiting around or hesitation. The poignancy of the narrative is deepened by the reference to the love that Abraham had for Isaac that is significant, as it refers to a father loving his son. I am not saying that Abraham walked off with Isaac, a donkey and his two servants without a care in the world, but he certainly strode out with a firm step and with his face resolutely set towards Mount Moriah.

I marvel at the faith of Abraham and can understand the length of his citation in the list of the heroes of faith in Hebrews eleven. He possessed all the instructions he needed, so there was no reason to delay. He had the destination, Mount Moriah; he had the object, a burnt offering; and he had the offering at hand, his only son. It would appear that he set off from Beersheba, so perhaps that is from where he cut the wood for the fire. In Abraham’s mind all things were now ready, so for three days they travelled until they could see their destination afar off. Abraham then said to the young men:

“Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you. 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” (Genesis 22:5–6).

The three day journey gave Abraham plenty of time to change his mind, if he so wished. Instead we see from the above verses that he ensured that nothing necessary for the burnt offering was left behind. Also there is more than a hint in Abraham’s words to the young men that his confidence was in God for he states, with assurance, that both he and Isaac would return to them.

There is also more than a hint here of an event many years later that would be enacted near to that very place to which they were travelling. I am, of course, referring to the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus, when He was not spared the fire of divine judgment, as He suffered for sin. In our story the fire carried by Abraham never touched the flesh of Isaac, nor singed a hair of his head. We must at this point call to mind the prophetic words spoken by Abraham that light up the scene with a truth that never ceases to thrill the heart of the believer:

“And Isaac said to his father Abraham, ‘My father!’ And he said, ‘Here am I, my son.’ He said, ‘Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?’ Abraham said, ‘God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.’ So they went both of them together” (Genesis 22:7-8).

How those words that “**God will provide the lamb**” ring out whenever and wherever the Christian Gospel is preached. We have only time to recall the words spoken by John the Baptist, when he saw the Lord Jesus by the river Jordan, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” John 1:29. I am moved to pause here to ask if all who are listening at this moment have received, through God’s rich grace, the forgiveness of sin, through believing in His Son, the Lamb of God.

For Abraham these words were more than a salve to calm Isaac, for they seem to express a quiet confidence in God which I believe was still there when he took the knife to slaughter his son. The fatal strike was not to be, for God intervened:

“But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, ‘Abraham, Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here am I.’ 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” (Genesis 22:11–12).

There are a couple of features from these verses that we need to note. One that I want to bring to our notice is Abraham’s answer when God called his name. It is so important for us to listen when God speaks. Abraham was listening and responded immediately with the cry of “Here am I.” One shudders to think what would have happened if Abraham was not listening for the voice of God. When the Word of God the Bible speaks we should listen, not speculate or even ignore it. The second is that Abraham could perform no greater act of trust and faith for he had not withheld his only son. Are we prepared to “... **present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God...**” (Romans 12:1). Such actions are an index of our faithfulness to the Lord.

Abraham’s response was to offer a ram which was trapped in a nearby thicket. The altar that father and son had built was ready. Now Abraham could offer up a burnt offering in the stead of his son. Not only that, for he riveted the incident into the history of his people, by giving the place a name to commemorate the great event. The appellation “The LORD will provide”, indicates his reverence for God’s intervention. A closer walk with God will provide us all with a greater insight into His greatness, as it did for Abraham. As J.N. Darby wrote:

In the desert God will teach thee,
What the God that thou hast found.
Patient, gracious, powerful, holy,
All His grace shall there abound.

On to Canaan’s rest still wending,
E’en thy wants and woes shall bring
Suited grace from high descending,
Thou shalt taste of mercy’s spring.

To know more about God, as we move through our lives, is to learn more of His greatness and glory.

Further blessing was in store for Abraham, as we see in verses 17 and 18, where the covenant is confirmed; the covenant where Abraham is promised to be the father of a great nation. He now returns to the young men in company with Isaac to travel back home to Beersheba. One last thought regarding Abraham, Isaac and the young men travelling together. I am writing these thoughts during the time of the lock-down. Whether it will still be on when this study is broadcast I know not. I do know that I am missing the fellowship of family and fellow Christians. We must be thankful for our blessings so may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

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