

Genesis 22 - The sacrifice of Isaac

The story of Abraham being willing to offer Isaac as a burnt offering at the command of God is read on several different levels. For our purposes today, we will focus on only one. The story is usually told in Sunday School classes as an example of the faith of Abraham and how we should have the same faith in being willing to sacrifice whatever thing is dearest to us or, more commonly, is presented as the story of how Abraham had become too attached to Isaac and had to be tested to make sure that God was still in first place.

This type of interpretation puts the emphasis on the faith of Abraham and our admission that we don't have that faith because we wouldn't be able to sacrifice our child, so we must not be as strong a faith as Abraham or in our being warned to not put anything ahead of God or it might be taken away (and then they might throw in the story of the rich young ruler for good measure.)

This is an injustice to the story and the book because they are not told to be about Abraham so much as they are told to tell us about God and His character.

Let's look at the story from another angle. For our purposes today, we need to forget the faith of Abraham as being the central theme of the story and focus on God as the central character and theme of the story.

We're not to emulate the faith of Abraham so much as we're to face the object of his faith.

Abraham was willing to do this thing because of his faith. His faith in what? 1) He had faith that Isaac was the promised seed who was to make him a great nation and to provide the ultimate promised Seed that would bless all the nations. 2) He had faith that since Isaac had no children yet that he couldn't die without God breaking His promise and covenant. 3) He had faith that since God had restored him and Sarah to life so they could make Isaac that God could restore Isaac to life even if Abraham temporarily killed him. 4) He had faith that God would take care of this (one way or another) but probably by providing a substitute sacrifice, but that's a far deeper theological direction that we want to take today.

To summarize, Abraham was presented with another paradox, another seemingly contradiction of facts such as he'd seen so often in his walk of faith: he has been miraculously provided the promised seed who would make the Promised Seed and how he's being told to kill the promised heir before the heir had made an heir.

By the way, you can read between the lines and see where Abraham thought all this out. It wasn't during the three-day journey, it was during his wood chopping. He was a rich sheik, he didn't have to chop his own wood. To paraphrase Granny's different types of fishing, he wasn't chopping for chopping, he was chopping for figuring.

Abraham's dilemma is as follows: he is to have faith even when that faith is tested.

What is he to have faith in?

He has been promised that God is his friend, shield, defender, great reward, etc. In other words, he's been promised that God loves him and has his best interest in mind.

He must believe that this is true.

Even if that is true, he must also believe that God is a God of His word and that what He has said he will do, he will do.

Even if that is true, he must also believe that God, being God and not being bound by the laws and rules that He made, is willing to do what he has said and will not change his mind.

Even if that is true, he must also believe that God is capable of doing what He has promised to do.

Even if that is true, he must believe that God is in control and able and willing to fulfill his promises in the face of seemingly contradictory and unrealistic situations and insurmountable problems.

To put those in systematic theology terms, in order for Abraham to act in faith, he must have faith in the love, goodness, immutability, capability, strength and sovereignty of God as the basis of his actions.

In short, Abraham's faith were based on his perceptions of God, and his perceptions of God were based on his observations, experiences and reflections of God over that past seventy years since he'd been called out of Haran. He is capable of walking by faith and not by sight based on what he'd seen. To walk by faith and not by sight is not to walk blindly like those trust exercises where you fall back and trust in the person behind you to catch. To walk by faith and not by sight is not to trust without any evidence; after all, even Abraham asked how he could know that what he believed was true. To walk by faith and not by sight is not to walk without looking where you're going as anyone who's spent time in a cattle field knows will not work.

To walk by faith and not by sight means that you're not walking by the sights you see before you right now, taking things, either good or ill, as they seem. Instead you are walking by the faith in what you have seen and experienced before. It's not a blind and baseless trust, it just means that you're not worried or overwhelmed by present circumstances because of your faith that the God who has worked out previous circumstances that were as bad or worse so that they turned out in your favor.

With all that in mind, let us ponder what Isaac we put on our own altars. Forget whatever that you're afraid is taking the place of God in your life. I submit that when Abraham was willing to place Isaac on the altar that he was not expressing a willingness to kill him dead and to do whatever was needed to put God before Isaac. I submit that what Abraham did not believe that he was climbing the mountain to get rid of Isaac but that he realized that that it was his faith in the promises and character of God that he was proving.

With that viewpoint, the Isaacs that we put on our own altar are whatever we have that is dependent on the promises and character of God. This has been on my mind ever since Judy announced that Jake has muscular dystrophy. That's a disease that could well be out of her and Jason's and Audra's hands. I had a mental picture of Jason putting Jake on an altar, not with the intention of sacrificing him but with the faith that Jehovah Jireh, the Lord will provide. David told us last week that was what he was doing with his health. Jack and Shirley have put their health on the altar.

We don't put on the altar what we're willing to sacrifice as in kill; we put on the altar what we're willing to sacrifice our control of, what we're willing to turn over to God, either because we are out of other options or because we have more faith in His capability to fix something in a way that will both serve to bring him honor and glory and to be the best for us.

That's the faith of Abraham: the faith that God loves us and will fulfill his promises to work everything together for good; the faith that is willing to relinquish control; the faith that is willing to trust Him with all that he's holds most dear; that faith that really believes Jehovah Jireh. This isn't a story about an old man who's got faith because he's willing to kill his only son; this is the story of man who's got faith because he's willing to put his only son, his future, his wealth, his descendants, his blessing, his land, his everything, on the altar of his faith in the promises and nature of God despite what common sense and present circumstances are telling him.

What's your Isaac: your health, your finances, your home, your children, your plans, your dreams, your grandchildren, your life, your death, your spouse, your work, your retirement, your hip, your back, your knees, your eyes, your independence, your cancer, your vacation, your hopes, your fears, your future, your church, your friends, your family, your eternal life. What are you willing to trust God to take care of for you even when it doesn't look like He's doing a very good job and may need some help or at least some good advice. You have to have the knife in your hand because otherwise you've still got a hold on whatever you claimed to be willing to put on the altar. A lot of what we claim to have put on the altar we've not actually let go of, at it's just like playing checkers, your move doesn't really count and the other person can't do anything while you've still got your finger on the checker that you're trying to decide whether or not to move.

What's your Isaac: Today you get to be Abraham, and while none of you are that old, most of you aren't that young anymore and everybody in here is closer to their grave than to their nursery. Abraham built his faith out of his experiences for seventy years. Today you get to be Abraham, and you've built an altar out of the rocks of your faith experiences over your years. What's your altar look like? How sturdy is it?

Last week David stood before us and read Psalm 32, "let those who are godly offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of great waters shall not reach them. You are a hiding place for me, you preserve me from trouble, you encompass me with deliverance...Many are the pangs of the wicked; but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord. Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice..."

Last week David stood before us and quoted from two songs of the church: "Because he lives, I can face tomorrow; because he lives, all fear is gone; because I know he holds the future, and life is worth the living just because he lives." "Many things about tomorrow, I don't claim to understand; but I know who holds tomorrow, and I know who holds my hand."

Last week David stood before us and got to be Abraham putting his Isaac on his altar and only the most worldly and ungodly would think that his prayers were unanswered and his faith misplaced because he's not here to stand before us this week.

So today you get to be Abraham. What's your Isaac?