

Trinity 7 (2022)

I don't know what you were thinking or feeling as today's Old Testament lesson was being read. I can only imagine it was one of revulsion and horror.

How could anyone, let alone God . . . the One whose name is love . . . the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . ask anyone to do what He asked Abraham to do . . . offer up his son as a sacrifice?

If you found this reading troubling, I sympathize. It is a hard passage.

Three quick preliminary thoughts:

First, I want to suggest that God dealt with those of old time according to their culture and experiences.

In the case of Abraham, the patriarch lived amongst a people whose ritual practices included human sacrifice. I am thinking in particular of the **Canaanites**.

So the practice would have been familiar to Abraham. There would have been nothing particularly odd about it . . . other than the God he had come to know as being utterly distinct from the gods of the nations around him was seemingly now enjoining the practice.

My first preliminary point is: God deals with people, in particular those of old time, according to their culture and experiences. He speaks their language.

My second is, if we see this story all the way through to its conclusion, we find that instead enjoining the practice of human sacrifice, it in fact forbids it. We learn that this cultic practice is not what God wants or requires from His faithful people.

As the passage opens, as Abraham and Isaac begin their trek towards Mt. Moriah, Isaac asks his dad about the apparent lack of a sacrificial animal.

To which Abraham responds: **“My son, God Himself will provide a sacrifice.”**

That is the ‘takeaway’ from this test given to Abraham: No mere mortal can pay the price of sin. This becomes clear when God at the last minute steps in and stops Abraham’s hand from coming down on Isaac.

Human sacrifices are in fact an abomination to the Lord God of the Universe. They are the way of the heathen.

A prohibition against this detestable practice would later be included in Israel’s law. In Chapter 30 of Deuteronomy, we find a warning against imitating the religious practices of the nations all around them.

“Take heed to thyself that thou be not snared by following them . . .

Thou shalt not do so unto the Lord thy God: for every abomination to the Lord, which he hateth, have they [the pagans] done unto their gods; for even their sons and their daughters they have burnt in the fire to their gods.”

Human sacrifice, then, is not what God wills or desires, even if God used it on this occasion to ‘test ‘Abraham’s faith . . . that is, to stretch it and make it stronger.

Bringing this last thought down to the present, seasons of testing may come – indeed will come -- our way. God allows them or sends them not to *break* us but to *make* us.

These tests are sent to increase our faith and reliance on Him . . . to create muscle. That is what this test placed before Abraham is about.

If you find yourself in one of those ‘testing’ situations this morning, ask God to walk with you through it and bring you safely out the other side.

“Lead us not into temptation [tests too hard for us].” Rather, “deliver us from evil,” Jesus teaches us to say in the Lord’s Prayer.

My third and final preliminary thought to is that this vignette in the life of Abraham should be viewed as a movie trailer.

Everyone I am sure knows what a movie trailer is. It gets you ready to see the film. It gives you an advance look at something that is to come.

Well, that is what this story does in regard to God's plans for putting the world back together again, for dealing with the problem of human sinfulness.

It points us to Calvary where God Himself in the person of His Son does what no mere mortal can do, pay the price for sin.

Many scholars, by the way, believe Mt. Moriah and Mt. Calvary are one and the same. So here we have a movie trailer of the crucifixion.

Well, these are my three preliminary thoughts on this passage. I want to move now to the main focus of this morning's message, which is: **The faith that brings blessing.**

Abraham had this kind of faith. It brought blessing, not just to the patriarch himself and to his physical offspring, but to all the families of the earth. It was from His line that Jesus came. You and I are beneficiaries of his faithfulness.

Let's look closer at Abraham's faith.

First, we find that it was a **focused faith.**

It was faith focused on the God who IS and speaks, the God who earlier had called Abram out of the Ur of the Chaldees and made promises to him concerning a land and a family . . . the God who later would bring life to Abraham's wife Sarah's dead womb, enabling her to have a child when she was around 100 years old.

And finally, the God who, if necessary, could raise Isaac and who in the future would raise Jesus.

The lesson for us is clear. Faith focused on any thing or one other than the living God is a sham.

Positive thinking is not enough. It may be helpful (Dr. Norman Vincent Peale and his disciple Dr. Robert Shuler certainly believed it was), but don't stop there. Turn your eyes on the God who raises the dead . . . the God who can raise you from a state of hopelessness and meaninglessness to a state of grace and purpose.

Abraham's faith, the faith that brought him blessing, was faith rightly focused. Ours must be as well if we are to receive all God wants to give us.

Secondly, Abraham's faith was an **obedient faith**. It was not what is called today 'easy believe-ism', by which (as far as I understand it) is meant a casual assent to certain facts about Jesus but one where taking up one's own cross and following Jesus is missing.

Abraham faith was very different. It involved believing with his heart and mind but also doing with his hands and feet. Two examples will suffice:

When Abraham received God's call to go from Ur to the land God had promised, he pulled up his tent pegs and went.

When he heard God say 'take your Son and go to the place I will show you', he did as he was directed.

The same must be true for us. The faith that pleases God and brings His blessing is an obedient, active, doing faith. It involves more than intellectual accent . . . head knowledge.

For example, if we say we believe in the God of truth. We must be willing to stand for truth on the job and in the public marketplace . . . even if it is costly.

If we believe in the God who says 'don't forsake the assembling of yourselves together' (Hebrews 10:25), then we must be willing – even if the State forbids such assembling – to do it any way and risk the consequences.

I grew up in the days when the Communists were the big bugger bears in the world. Once in Sunday School, we were asked what we do if we arrived at church and found the doors nailed shut and a sign warning of serious consequences if anyone tried to gather for worship. The question we were asked was: What would you do? Would you be faithful?

The faith that pleases God and brings blessing is a daring, obedient and yes at times costly faith.

Peter in Acts says it best. When hauled before the authorities and commanded not to preach in the name of Jesus, his response was:

“We ought to obey God rather than men.”

Finally and thirdly, Abraham's faith was progressive. What do I mean by progressive?

Well, I mean that it grew by doing. The more Abraham trusted God, the more he found he could trust God.

Each test God laid before him fitted him for the next test. This too is a characteristic of the faith that brings blessing. It's a growing, maturing thing.

Put another way: Faith / faithfulness begets faith /faithfulness.

The lesson for us is to trust and obey God in the little challenges that come our way. Then, when greater ones come, we shall be equipped to meet them. Baby steps precede great strides. ///

In summary, the faith that pleases God and brings blessing is: **focused**, **obedient** and **progressive**. Let's not settle for anything less.

Take some time this week to reflect on your own faith. It is a faith that pleases God and brings blessing? Or does it need some work?

Pray for faith. Ask the Lord to increase and mature the faith you already have. ///

In closing, the God who led Abraham stands ready to lead you. There are many twists and turns and tests on the roadway of life. Faith is required. Have faith in God and go forward.