

BY FAITH
ABRAHAM

GIL RUGH

By Faith Abraham

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1000 South 84th Street, Lincoln, Nebraska 68510-4499

Phone (402) 483-4541

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“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old gained approval. . . . By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents . . . for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Heb. 11:1,2,8–10).

The Call and the Promise

God Chooses Abraham

Suppose God showed up on your doorstep one morning and said, “Pack up everything you have and move. I will show you where to go after you hit the road.” How would you react?

Now consider how Abraham responded in that situation. One day while Abraham was living in the city of Ur in Mesopotamia, God appeared to him and said, “Abraham, pack your bags and head out,” or, as Genesis 12:1 puts it: “Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father’s house, to the land which I will show you.”

Can you imagine the neighbors as they watched Abraham pack?

“Abraham, where are you going?”

“I don’t know.”

“What are you going to live in?”

“I packed the tents.”

“Well, show us your map.”

“I don’t have a map.”

“What do you mean, you don’t have a map?”

“I don’t know where I’m going, so I don’t need a map!”

A few years ago I had a similar experience—not exactly the same as Abraham’s, of course. I was returning home after a trip, and a snowstorm forced the plane to land in another city 60 miles from my hometown. I hurried off the plane and ran to a car rental

agency to beat the crowd. I later learned no one else was renting a car because of the snow! I quickly signed the contract, grabbed the keys, picked up my luggage, ran out, jumped into the car and went speeding out the gate into the dark night. A few blocks down the road I realized I did not have the faintest idea where I was. I was going, but I did not know *where* I was going! God, of course, knew where Abraham was going. And when God said “Go!” Abraham just headed out on foot, knowing only that God would show him where to go—an act of incredible faith.

Faith Defined

Abraham is the most outstanding example of faith in the Bible and serves as the primary example of faith in the New Testament. But what exactly is faith? How do you define it?

Hebrews 11 opens with the words: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1).

Faith gives us confident assurance concerning the things we hope for—the things God has promised to us who believe in His Son, Jesus Christ. Faith produces a conviction by which we live, a conviction that controls our lives and conduct. The *result* of true faith is obedience.

Abraham Moves Out

Obedience pervades Hebrews 11. Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Rahab and a host of others are given as examples of men and women who believed and obeyed God. Abraham’s example begins in verse 8: “By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going” (Heb 11:8).

God called Abraham. Abraham trusted God, and in obedience, packed up his belongings and “departed from the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran” (Acts 7:4).

What Abraham Left Behind

Do not picture Abraham as a godly man living in Ur as a testimony for God. Joshua 24 gives some details about Abraham’s family before God called him out of Ur: “From ancient times your fa-

thers lived beyond the River, namely, Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, and they served other gods” (Josh. 24:2). Abraham was raised in a culture and family of idol worshipers.

Much excavation has been done in the ancient city of Ur, so we know quite a bit about the city as it existed in Abraham’s time, 2000 years before Christ. Located somewhat south of Babylon, Ur was a modern city for its day, offering all the conveniences and luxuries of its time.

We are not told how God reached down into the family of Terah and selected Abraham for Himself. Abraham received the call of God in Ur and moved to Haran. From Haran, God moved him into the land of Canaan.

We are not told why Abraham stopped in Haran. Some believe it was a mistake on Abraham’s part, that he should have proceeded directly to Palestine. Others say he stopped in Haran to wait for his father to die. It was, after all, *Abraham* whom God had called, not his father. Whatever the reason, the Scriptures never say anything negative about it.

What we do know is that at a certain point in time God intervened and reached into this pagan family in a pagan city and sovereignly called out Abraham. His call is an example of God’s sovereign elective work in choosing men for Himself. Abraham was a pagan idol worshiper, but God appeared to him, revealed Himself to him and said, “Pack your bags and leave.” Abraham obeyed God.

To the people around him, it must have seemed rather foolish for Abraham to leave the thriving, modern city of Ur. His house, any land he owned, any investments he had would have been tied to that city. And while it is easy for us, centuries later, to read the account of Abraham’s call and journey and to find his adventures exciting, it would not have been nearly as exciting if we had to live as Abraham lived!

No Turning Back

In the biblical account you will find no discussion between Abraham and Sarah about returning to Ur. “And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return” (Heb. 11:15). They could have chosen to return, but Abraham never considered it. In fact, he was so

set against it that later he would not allow his son to leave Canaan even in pursuit of a wife!

The call of Abraham parallels our call as believers. Just as God called Abraham and separated him from the city and culture in which he lived, He has called us and separated us for Himself. We have been removed—not physically but spiritually—from among the people of the world in which we live. We sometimes sing the song “I Have Decided To Follow Jesus,” which ends with the lines, “No turning back, no turning back.” As believers we have lost our identity with the world in which we reside—and there is no going back.

Abraham the Alien

We like happy endings to stories such as this. It would please us to hear that Abraham obeyed God, packed all his belongings, forsook everything, and when he arrived in Canaan God gave him a far bigger house and more land than he had ever dreamed of. That is not the case.

This part of Abraham’s story ends: “By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise” (Heb. 11:9). That sounds almost like a contradiction. How could Abraham live as an alien in the land of promise? God said, “I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession” (Gen. 17:8). Yet Abraham lived “as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise” (Heb. 11:9).

It was not only Abraham who lived as an alien. His son Isaac and Isaac’s son Jacob were strangers there as well. They all inherited the promise, but none of them entered into the realization of that promise.

Abraham wandered around in the land of Canaan year after year. When he left Haran he was 75 years old. When he died he was 175. In 100 years he never owned any of this land except one little plot in which he buried his wife Sarah.

If I had been Abraham, I might have begun to suffer discouragement by this time. I would have been thinking “It is great to have all these spiritual blessings, but Lord, it would be nice to have something a little more *concrete* right now. I cannot eat spiritual blessings. It would be nice not to have to drive this clunker, and maybe a

down payment on a small house, if You don't mind?"

But that is not how it was with Abraham. He was content to live in tents up and down Palestine. Why? Because he was not looking at what he could see. He was looking for "the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb. 11:10). Abraham's eyes were fixed on spiritual promises. In spite of the fact that he had no concrete, tangible proof that he would inherit what God had promised, he still believed the promises of God. He saw their fulfillment at a distance.

The point is not just that Abraham believed God, but that he believed God *in spite of not seeing what God had promised*. Abraham could have looked around at all the houses and lands others owned, and envied them for what they had. But he was not concerned. He was just a pilgrim traveling through. He did not need to own anything.

Abraham was sustained through a hundred years of wandering back and forth across Canaan by his desire for "a better country, that is a heavenly one" (Heb. 11:16). He understood the people of the world being rooted down here, but he knew that he was going to a city that God was constructing, so he did not expect to put down any roots.

The same thing that sustained Abraham sustained the Apostle Paul: "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory" (Phil. 3:20,21).

Paul was a Roman citizen, yet his primary citizenship was in heaven. He anticipated the coming of Jesus Christ, at which time he would be transformed to be like Him.

Peter revealed this mind-set when he wrote to the severely persecuted, first-century Christians: "Those who reside as aliens . . . conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay upon earth" (1 Pet. 1:1,17). Like Abraham, these early believers were temporary visitors to this world and were to be living in light of that fact.

Christians today have been called out of this world system as well. We should be living our lives as strangers on this earth. We need to constantly remind ourselves that this is not where we live; it is not our permanent residence. We must not put down too many

roots or become attached. We must not envy the people of the world for what they have. They *belong* here; this is home to them. But this is not *our* home. We, like Abraham, are just visitors passing through.

Abraham Declared Righteous

Because the New Testament consistently takes us back to Abraham's demonstration of faith in Genesis 15:6, the question is sometimes raised as to whether Abraham was a believer when he left Ur of the Chaldeans in Genesis 12. I believe he was. There would be no point in God using an unregenerate man as an example of faith.

Genesis 15:6 is referred to frequently, not because Abraham was the first to have faith, but because his faith is so clearly and succinctly stated. Neither is Genesis 15:6 the point of Abraham's salvation, but rather a clear statement that Abraham was saved by faith. Abraham believed God, and God credited that faith to him as righteousness (see Rom. 4:3). Abraham did not, however, receive righteousness by what he did. He received righteousness by believing God.

Some of the Jews of Paul's day claimed that in addition to faith you had to be circumcised to receive salvation. Paul demonstrated the falseness of this teaching by showing that Abraham was declared righteous in Genesis 15:6—*before* he was circumcised: "How then was it reckoned? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised" (Rom. 4:10, see also v. 11).

This makes it clear that circumcision cannot be essential for salvation. Abraham was righteous while uncircumcised *because he believed God*.

Faith and Works

The relationship between faith and works has been beset with controversy since the days of the Apostles.

Paul states in Romans 4 that Abraham was not justified by works, but by faith: "What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before

God. For what does the Scripture say? ‘And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.’ Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness” (Rom. 4:1-5).

James, on the other hand, writes, “Was not Abraham our father justified by works?” (James 2:21). Is James saying that you have to perform good works to go to heaven? If so, he contradicts what Paul wrote. And yet, since God authored both of these statements, there can be no contradiction.

One of the keys to unraveling this mystery is found in James 2:23, quoting from Genesis 15:6: “And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.’ ” Abraham was declared righteous in Genesis 15. Twenty-five years later he obeyed God and offered up Isaac. His works were working with his faith.

In James 2:14, James asks, “What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him?” In other words, can a person be saved by saying he believes in God if there is no change in his life? The argument continues in James 2:17–20: “Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. But someone may well say, ‘You have faith, and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.’ You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?”

To say you believe in God is really saying nothing more than what the demons say. Demons believe in God, too, but they are not saved. Their lives evidence no change in conduct or character.

James is saying that, though you may claim to be a Christian, if there is no evidence of change in your life or conduct, there is no reason to believe that you are saved. Your claim merely places you in the company of demons.

I trusted Jesus Christ as my Savior as a ten-year-old boy. What proof is there of that? There should be evidence of change in my life and conduct. If not, then I do not have faith that has resulted in salvation. As Paul told the Corinthians, “If any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things

have come” (2 Cor. 5:17).

If you say you have trusted Christ but your life is unchanged, you are a liar (see 1 John 2:4; James 2:26). But if you really believe, then God will change you on the inside. If God changes you on the inside, that will manifest itself with a change of conduct. If that evidence is missing, there is no reason to believe that salvation ever occurred.

Abraham was saved by faith, and his great acts of obedience were the result of his faith. It is the same with every person God ever saves—Old Testament, New Testament or twentieth century. Righteousness is credited to those who believe, regardless of whether they are baptized or confirmed or join a church, or anything else. When a person believes in the revelation God has given concerning His Son Jesus Christ, he is saved. But his works will give proof of his faith.

God Promises a Son

In Genesis 15:5, God promises Abraham that his descendants will be like the stars in the heavens. He has already told Abraham that they will be like the dust of the earth (see Gen. 13:16). Keep in mind that these assurances were coming to a man who did not have even *one* child yet!

Puzzled, Abraham asks God who his heir will be “since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” (Gen. 15:2). God assures him that a son from Abraham’s own body will be his heir.

If God had said, “Abraham, you will have a son in nine months,” it might have made Abraham’s faith easier to comprehend. But God did not give Abraham a clue as to when this big event would occur. At this point Abraham was already 75 years old! At age 76 nothing happened. Nothing happened when he reached 78 or 80 or 83 or 85. He turned 86, 88, 90. “Uh, remember me, God? Abraham? You promised. Remember Sarah? She is now eighty! We are still waiting for our firstborn.” Can you imagine Abraham trying to explain this to the people in the land?

And still the years rolled by—95, 97, 99. “Abraham, do you remember what I promised you?”

“Yes, Lord, but I am 99 years old—and Sarah’s 89!”

“Is anything too difficult for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, at this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son” (Gen. 18:14).

Sarah, listening behind the tent flap, went into convulsions. “Should we have a good time again, Abraham and I? And can we produce a child out of that?” (see Gen. 18:12,13).

This event is condensed into a few sentences in Hebrews 11, but when you consider that these two verses cover 25 years in an old man’s life, you realize the kind of faith Abraham had to truly believe God.

Sarah’s Faith

What about Sarah? Hebrews 11:11 presents her as a woman of faith. “By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised.”

The fact that Abraham could uproot her for such a futile journey, humanly speaking, and that she put up with all the traipsing around is a good indication of Sarah’s strength of character. In the Old Testament she is often mentioned for her lack of faith; but if we focus on that, we miss some important character traits pointed out in the New Testament. For example, Peter uses Sarah as an example of how a godly woman ought to live in relationship to her husband (see 1 Pet. 3:6).

The emphasis of Hebrews 11:11, however, is on Abraham more than on Sarah. The simplest and most literal translation of this verse reads “By faith he [Abraham], together with Sarah, was empowered to deposit seed.” In other words, by faith Abraham was empowered to fertilize Sarah for the conception of Isaac. Sarah is obviously included, but the emphasis is on the faith of Abraham who received the ability to produce a son with Sarah. The same incident is recorded in Romans 4:19–21, again with the emphasis on Abraham.

Faith Applied

Abraham found himself in a situation that you and I sometimes experience. He had the promises of God, but they seemed far

removed from his personal experience.

Picture Abraham at ninety years of age, going around telling people, "Guess what! I am going to have so many kids, you will not be able to count them!" You get the idea. Abraham's experience was over here, and God's Word seemed way out on the other end of the spectrum. But that was all right. God stood between; He would bring them together in His time. Abraham accepted that by faith.

I have to admit that I sometimes wonder, "God, have You forgotten me? Do You remember the promises You made? You said You would see me through. You promised no testing will come into my life that is more than I can handle. But, Lord, my experiences are here and Your promises are way over there."

God says, "Good. Trust Me."

I say, "Well, could You bring us a little bit closer together? Then I will trust You." But once I can see it, then I do not need to have faith. The further apart this gap seems to be, the more faith it takes.

God could have waited until after Isaac was born to make the promise. But then it would have taken less faith on Abraham's part. Rather, God kept him childless until he was an old man with an old woman for a wife, giving Abraham nothing to hang on to but "God told me."

Have you ever prayed about something for 25 years? I begin to get impatient after 25 *days!* As the weeks and months turn into years, I figure it just is not going to happen. But 25 years later, because of his willingness to believe God, Abraham received the ability to produce a child. God was true to His Word, and Abraham had not become bitter or changed his mind.

For Abraham and Sarah to have a baby at their age required a miracle. "Therefore, also, there was born of one man, and him as good as dead at that, as many descendants as the stars of heaven in number, and innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore" (Heb. 11:12).

God kept His Word. We have Jews all over the world today because God kept His Word. We can count the physical descendants of Abraham in the multiplied millions. When you add to that the spiritual descendants as well—which is where Gentile believers fit in—we see that God kept His Word again.

The Test

Abraham Tested

God kept His promise. As old as they were, Abraham and Sarah had a son. Can't you just imagine Abraham's joy? "Sarah, we are so blessed. Through this boy of ours, we are going to have more descendants than there are stars in the heavens and sand in the sea. God is so good!"

All the promises God made to Abraham were centered in Isaac. Without him there could be no fulfillment of those promises. So what happened next results in the most outstanding example of faith anywhere in the Bible. It takes faith out of the realm of the intangible and brings it into the realm of the tangible. God tells Abraham to take Isaac—the love of his heart—*and offer him as a burnt offering.*

The Test Defined

The Lord had been good to Abraham and Sarah. They had settled into life with their miracle son, Isaac. But God called to Abraham once again. I cannot help wondering if Abraham, when he heard God's voice, expected another great blessing. "Here I am, Lord. Bring on another blessing."

The narrative begins in Genesis 22: "Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' And 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. 22:1-2).

Put yourself in Abraham's place and imagine his feelings. To prepare a burnt offering, the throat of the sacrifice is slit and the blood is drained. Then the sacrifice is placed on an altar and burned to ashes. Yet this is what God asked Abraham to do—a mind-boggling request!

Notice the four ways God identifies Isaac: "your son," "your only son," "whom you love," "Isaac." There is no mistaking who God means. There is some misunderstanding today, however, about the phrase "only begotten son" in Hebrews 11:17.

Only begotten does not carry the idea of the only child born to someone. The emphasis is on uniqueness—being the only son of a kind or type. Abraham was the father of Ishmael, but Ishmael was not the same kind of son as Isaac because the promises centered in Isaac. Isaac was the only one of this kind, the only one in whom the promises could be fulfilled.

Faith in Action

The test God brought to Abraham was designed to show the tremendous character of Abraham's faith: "By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac; and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; it was he to whom it was said, 'In Isaac your descendants shall be called' " (Heb. 11:17,18).

God was not enticing Abraham to do something sinful. God never does that (see James 1:13,14). Rather, God was "proving" or "trying" Abraham—putting him to the test as part of the refining process of his life.

In response, Abraham demonstrated his faith by such an overwhelming act of obedience that it makes our greatest acts of faith appear pitiful by comparison. You cannot see faith, but when a person has genuine faith in God and His Word, you will see the results of that faith manifested in his life. The offering of Isaac was an act of faith—an action that came out of Abraham's reliance upon what God had said. This is the pattern illustrated throughout Hebrews 11. It should be the pattern for every person who professes to be a believer in Jesus Christ.

If you or I received from God the instructions that Abraham received, we would probably run around telling our friends to drop everything and go to prayer—not that there is anything wrong with

asking people to pray for you if God asks you to do something difficult. But sometimes I think we try to make up for a lack of confidence in what God says by asking others to pray about it with us. We are hoping someone will either talk us into it or out of it.

But that is not the way it was with Abraham. There was no argument between him and God: “So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son” (Gen. 22:3). When God told Abraham to offer his son as a sacrifice, He did not give Abraham fifty-two reasons why, nor did Abraham ask God for an explanation. God said, “Do it.” So bright and early the next morning the alarm clock went off and off went Abraham!

Me, I would have been stalling like crazy—*Surely there must be something to slow this down and give the Lord a chance to change His mind!* Furthermore, if I were to be giving a great demonstration of faith, I would want to tell some people about it. But Abraham said nothing to anyone. God’s Word was clear to him, so he just followed through, demonstrating his faith. He displayed a good pattern for us to follow: When God calls upon us to do something difficult, do it right away.

Obedience and Ishmael

Genesis 21 gives a similar example of Abraham’s great faith. Abraham was greatly distressed because of the conflict between the mothers of his two sons. Sarah was asking Abraham to drive out Hagar and her son so Sarah’s son would not have to share the inheritance with Ishmael. Abraham loved Ishmael; he was his son, also. But God told Abraham to go ahead and send Hagar and Ishmael away (Gen. 21:12,13). Surely that was hard for Abraham, but notice what Abraham does in verse 14: “So Abraham rose early in the morning . . . and gave her the boy and sent her away.” Abraham exhibited a good pattern. When God called him to do the hard thing, he set about doing it right away.

Obedience and Isaac

God’s command to sacrifice Isaac touched Abraham in the most sensitive area of his life: Was his love for God greater than his love for Isaac? He had waited 25 years for Isaac. Had not his faith been

stretched and tested enough? He finally had his son; he had just begun to grow to maturity, and now God says, "I want to take him back. Make him a burnt offering to Me."

You have to appreciate Abraham's faith. What did he do? He did the same thing he did when God spoke to him about Ishmael. He rose up early in the morning in prompt, immediate, unquestioning obedience. I cannot imagine that Abraham was anxious to get to the place of sacrifice, but there was no argument or delay on his part either. Abraham was a man of faith.

The Journey

"And he split wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from a distance" (Gen. 22:3,4).

Moriah is an interesting place. The spot where Abraham was told to offer Isaac is the very place where, a thousand years later under King Solomon, God had the temple constructed. And a thousand years after that, in the same vicinity, the Son of God Himself was offered as a sacrifice on the mount called Calvary—the place of the skull. This is a very significant place in the history of the descendants of Abraham.

Moriah was some distance from where Abraham lived, and the Bible is amazingly silent about those three days. Can you imagine how difficult it would have been for Abraham to carry on a normal conversation with Isaac during that time? I would have had ulcers on my ulcers at the end of three days. But as you read the Genesis account, you begin to appreciate the greatness of Abraham's faith.

Abraham's Mind-set

When Abraham approached Mount Moriah, he said to the young men with him, "Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go yonder, and we will worship and return to you" (Gen. 22:5).

Something tells me we would read Genesis 22:5 and miss an important statement were it not for Hebrews 11. Was Abraham telling a fib? Did he really mean, "We will worship, but *I* will return to you?" No. Hebrews 11:19 tells us what Abraham was thinking: "He considered that God is able to raise men even from the dead."

Abraham was on his way to offer Isaac as a burnt offering to God. He knew that the promises of God centered on Isaac. Through Isaac the seed would be developed and the covenant promises would be realized. But just because God had said, "You must sacrifice Isaac as a burnt offering" did not mean that Abraham doubted that God would keep His Word. Abraham was fully confident that he and Isaac would go up to make a sacrifice and that he and Isaac would come back from the sacrifice. He expected a tremendous event to occur— the death and resurrection of his only-begotten son, Isaac!

Where in the world did Abraham ever get such an idea? I do not know, but Abraham knew that God had promised him descendants through Isaac. He concluded that God would somehow raise Isaac from the dead. After all, that is not too hard for Abraham's God. But believing it takes genuine faith!

To me it is staggering that Abraham had such a commitment to the promises of God. Think of your own firstborn child. Put yourself in Abraham's place. What would be going through your mind: "Oh, I am sure God will raise him from the dead?" Do you have that much firm, unshakable confidence in the Word of God? Do you really believe that no matter what comes into your life, God is going to keep His word? Abraham believed it.

Isaac As a Type

The tension builds as the narrative continues: "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 the two of them walked on together" (Gen. 22:6). When you get right down to the end, it is Abraham and Isaac.

An interesting type is being portrayed here. A type is a symbol of something to be fulfilled: Jesus Christ is going to be sacrificed at the hand of His Father. The picture of Abraham taking the wood and laying it on Isaac, his son, reminds us of the events in John 19 where the cross is laid upon Jesus Christ and He is obligated to carry it to the place of the sacrifice.

When you come to the end of Christ's sacrifice, it is Christ and His Father. All the wrath of the Father is being poured out on the Son who is bearing the sins of the world. The type being portrayed through Isaac is very clear.

Isaac's Question

The Bible does not tell us anything about Isaac's thoughts. But as Abraham and Isaac walked along, Isaac posed a question: "And Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, 'My father.' And he said, 'Here am I, my son.' And he said, 'Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?'" (Gen. 22:7).

Isaac carried the wood. Abraham carried the knife and the coals for the fire. Isaac was no dummy. Can you imagine the difficulty of this question for Abraham? What could he say? "You are it, son?" That does not fit the scene at all.

Abraham's amazing faith comes through clearly in Gen. 22:8, "And Abraham said, 'God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.'" As far as Abraham knew, the lamb God had provided at this point was Isaac. But Abraham's answer satisfied Isaac.

The Sacrifice

As the story builds toward a climax, the events slow down, giving us a feeling of the awesomeness of what transpired next.

When they arrived at the place God designated, Abraham built the altar, arranged the wood . . . and then went to pray for three days. No he did not. Abraham knew what to do.

When you have the clear Word of God, there is nothing to pray about. Sometimes we Christians frustrate ourselves terribly by praying about things God has already spoken to. What did Abraham have to pray about? He had the clear Word of God and he believed what God had said. The only thing left to do was to get about doing it, as hard as it was.

Genesis 22:9 describes this tremendously difficult task: "Then they came to the place of which God had told him; and Abraham built the altar there, and arranged the wood, and bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar on top of the wood."

We are not told what Abraham said to Isaac. What could he tell him? How could he explain it? I think the silence of Scripture is significant.

The Age Myth

Sometimes you see pictures of this event that portray Abraham tying a little baby on a pile of wood. But that is not what happened. We do not know how old Isaac was, but we do know he was old enough to carry the wood for three days. And when they left the servants behind, the Bible says they walked on together, so Abraham did not have to carry him.

In Genesis 22:5, Abraham calls Isaac a “young man” or “lad,” the same designation given to the two servants who accompanied them. So Isaac may well have been a teenager or a man in his twenties or even thirties.

Abraham Acts—God Intervenes

Genesis 22:10 describes the awesome act of faith: “And Abraham stretched out his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.” And then—just at the right time—God intervened!

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

Can you imagine what would have happened if the angel had been 30 seconds late? Or what if he had called out and Abraham had not heard him the first time? God is always there just at the right time—never too early, never too late.

It is clear that Abraham was going through with the sacrifice. God was convinced that he was: “And he said, ‘Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me’ ” (Gen. 22:12).

Abraham was given the opportunity to see clearly that he loved God more than anything. There was nothing he would hold back from God. God knew what Abraham was going to do, but this test was part of the refining process for Abraham.

The Type Fulfilled

At this point, the comparison between Isaac and Christ breaks down. A substitute was found for Isaac. When it came time to fulfill the type, however, there was no intervention. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died. His death was necessary. It was essential that He die

on the cross to pay the penalty for sins. But what Abraham believed would happen to Isaac *did* happen to the Son of God. Christ was crucified, buried and *raised from the dead*.

You may wonder why God would put this elderly man Abraham through such agony. But “shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Gen. 18:25 KJV). Abraham was tested, or proved, by God. As a result of that test, Abraham “received him [Isaac] back as a type” (Heb. 11:19). In other words, when Abraham untied Isaac and he got down off that altar, it was just like he had been raised from the dead.

That mirrors the picture of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. Though He was executed, Christ came down from the cross, and He is alive today. Isaac was not executed, but as far as Abraham was concerned, it was just as though he had come back from the dead.

The type now switches to a ram caught in the thicket: “Then Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the place of his son. And Abraham called the name of that place The Lord Will Provide, as it is said to this day, ‘In the mount of the Lord it will be provided’ ” (Gen. 22:13,14).

What a prophetic statement! Two thousand years later, “In the mount of the Lord,” God provided a sacrifice—just as Abraham said He would in Genesis 22:8. The ram that God provided for Abraham portrays the ultimate sacrifice God would provide for Himself—“The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

Abraham demonstrated tremendous faith. He was willing to take his own son—his only son, the son he loved so much, the son through whom he realized all God’s prophecies would be fulfilled—and to execute him at God’s command. It is easy to read about, but it is hard to put that kind of faith into action.

In God’s Time

The story does not end there. Many years after he offered up Isaac, Abraham died without ever receiving the promises God made to him concerning his land and descendants. He had left the security of Ur to follow God without knowing where he was going. He had obeyed God only to wander for a hundred years as an alien in

Canaan. He had waited twenty-five years for the son God promised him. And, finally, he had died without ever owning any of the promised land except the small plot in which he buried Sarah. Was Abraham a fool? Did he go through all those years of wandering and testing for nothing? We will find the answer by looking at the character of God: “ ‘By Myself I have sworn,’ declares the Lord, ‘because you have . . . not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens, and as the sand which is on the seashore . . . and in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice’ ” (Gen. 22:16–18).

Hebrews 6:13–18 picks up on this and says that God, “by two unchangeable things,” guaranteed this covenant to Abraham. God’s Word in and of itself is unchangeable, but God took an oath upon Himself just to show how unchanging His promise to Abraham really is. Since God cannot lie or go back on His Word, we know a day will come when Abraham will see the fulfillment of all that God promised him.

Abraham was not a fool. He was a man of exceptional faith.

Applying It Personally

Being great in faith, as Abraham was, does not mean never having any lows. Even this giant of faith went over the edge. Once, he and Sarah tried to help God along by producing a son through Sarah’s handmaiden, Hagar. Twice, Abraham passed off Sarah as his sister. Like David, Abraham was not always faithful, but God intervened. God will always do what He promises.

That encourages me, because He has made promises to me in His Word as well. If they depended upon *my* faithfulness, they would have been blown before we even got started. But God always overrules.

I would like to avoid the kinds of lows Abraham had. But because I am often unfaithful, they come. Yet when they do, I want to be sure I get right back up and get my faith lined up where it ought to be.

During hard times there is always the danger of thinking our trials are unique or that something is wrong in our lives—otherwise we should not be expected to bear these kinds of trials. But we learn

from Hebrews 11 that just the opposite is true: trials produce endurance (see also James 1:2,3). True faith is characterized by endurance. We must never lose sight of that. If we have trusted in God's revelation in the person of Jesus Christ, we will, like Abraham, need endurance to persevere in the faith. And we only get endurance through experiencing the trials by which God tests our faith.

Abraham's actions demonstrated that he was a true worshiper of God. He gave unreserved devotion and commitment. He did not withhold even that which was most dear to him. Yet all he had to hang onto was what God had said.

God's Word is all we have as well, but that is good. If we could see the outcome of God's work in our lives, we would not need faith. Living by faith means trusting God and doing what He says in spite of not seeing the fulfillment of what He has promised.

As I ponder this account of Abraham's awesome demonstration of faith, I must ask myself: Is there anything I consider too precious to be sacrificed to God? Is there anything that, if God said, "Lay it on the altar to Me; I want it today," would cause me to answer, "God, I would do anything for You, but I cannot do that?"

That is the issue. Do you love anyone or anything more than you love the Lord Jesus Christ? Are you following the pattern of Abraham who demonstrated that nothing was more dear to his heart than God Himself? Do you believe God and His Word and obey whatever He commands you to do? Are you living a life of faith that is demonstrated by your actions?

Before you can demonstrate your faith by your actions, however, there is one more question: Do you believe that you are a sinner destined for hell and that Jesus Christ, God's Son, died to pay the penalty for your sins? That's what God says about your condition and His provision for your eternal salvation. Why not make today the day you take God at His Word and begin to walk by faith?

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