



G R A C E

REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

SOLI † DEO † GLORIA

## THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

### Sermon Notes

### *The Testing of Abraham*

Hebrews 11:17-19

April 11, 2010

“<sup>17</sup>By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, <sup>18</sup>of whom it was said, ‘Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.’ <sup>19</sup>He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.”

- ❖ On Sunday, January 8, 1956, on the banks of a small river in the jungles of Ecuador, five young missionaries [Jim Elliot, Nate Saint, Ed McCully, Peter Fleming, Roger Youderian] were savagely killed by a group of native Auca Indians – a group they were attempting to reach with the Gospel Message of Christ.
- ❖ However, the story of Jim Eliot and his fellow-missionaries did not end with their sudden and “tragic” deaths in the South American jungle. In fact, it is what happened *after* their deaths that makes their lives and legacies so inspiring.
- ❖ In her book *The Savage, My Kinsmen*, Elisabeth Eliot writes about her feelings after Jim’s death. **“I knew that if life was to go on, it must go on meaningfully.** I was forced back to the real reason for missionary work – indeed, the real reason for living at all...It is only in obeying God that we may know Him. **Obedience, if it is a good reason for dying, is just as good a reason for living.”**
- ❖ And so, after the death of her husband, rather than returning to the United States with her one year old daughter Valerie, Elisabeth Eliot (against the wishes of her parents) chose to stay in Ecuador. No doubt this decision was perceived by many – to include committed evangelical Christians – as **unwise and irresponsible.**

- ❖ After working in the Ecuadorian jungle for three years, eventually Elisabeth, her daughter Valerie, and Rachel Saint (the widow of Nate Saint), were able to gain access into the Auca Territory. Consequently, one author writes, “The linguistic work of these women brought Christ’s message of salvation to the tribe that killed their loved ones. They became the first to enter the Auca territory – and live to tell the story.” Many Aucan natives came to saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ because of the work of these selfless missionaries.
- ❖ And despite the dangers and sacrifices, their faith in God’s plan of salvation kept them committed to their calling. A famous journal entry from Jim Eliot on October 28, 1949, six years before his death, tells the story well. “**He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.**”
- ❖ The Eliots and the four other couples stand in a line extending back to the days of Abraham. This is a line of faithful men and women who “**gave what they could not keep to gain what they could not lose.**”
- ❖ As much as any figure in the Old Testament, the patriarch Abraham represents this type of devotion and commitment to the purpose of God.

- I. **God Tested Abraham**
- II. **Abraham Obeyed God**
- III. **God Blessed Abraham**

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## I. **God Tested Abraham**

- **Verse 17** states, “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son,” Notice the Verse begins, “**By faith** Abraham, when **he was tested**...”
- The testing of Abraham is recorded in **Genesis 22:1-14**.
- **Genesis 22:2** states, “[God] said, ‘Take you 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.’”
- The fact that God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son is repulsive and unconscionable to many. In fact, humanistic and conventional wisdom would say that such a demand from God is not just cruel, foolish, and senseless but barbaric and primitive.
  - In fact, there are many stories and commandments in Scripture that are difficult to deal with from a human perspective. The reason for this is because we think it makes no sense for God to act the way He does. Yet,

how we react to the commandments of God and scriptural accounts in the Old and New Testament speak volumes about our relationship with and understanding of God. But there is another reality at work with respect to our displeasure with God when He acts outside of how we think He should.

- The problem is that **man has created god in his own image**; however, according to Biblical truth, **God has created man in His own image**. And so, the “god” that most people follow is a “god” that is more reflective of who *they are* rather than an autonomous and Sovereign being who does as He chooses. In fact, in every false religion, even those that masquerade as “Christian”, the heart of the religion – it’s god – is that it is centered on man, not the one true and living God.
- Yet, one naturally asks, “Why would God command Abraham to sacrifice his son?”
  - Certainly the act would, as we will see shortly, foreshadow the sacrificial work of the Son of God; however, there is also something else God was teaching Abraham...and us.
  - God was teaching Abraham to put his faith and trust in Him (God), and to place nothing before God. He was teaching Abraham (and us) the truth of **Matthew 22:37**, where the Lord Jesus Christ speaks of the greatest commandment, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”
- Last week, I quoted from Nancy Pearcey’s *Total Truth*, where she stated, “In every area of life, we need to distinguish between the way God originally created the world, and the way it has been deformed and defaced by sin [because of the Fall]. Reformed thinkers label this *structure* and *direction*. **Structure** refers to the character of the world, which is still good even after the Fall – music, art, science, sexuality, relationships work, the state...**Direction** refers to the way we “direct” those structures to serve either God or idols. In every enterprise in which we are engaged, we need to ask: (1) What is the original structure that God created, and (2) how is it being distorted and directed to sinful purposes?”
  - Therefore, as we see, all things God has created are “good”; yet, these things can also be used in “bad” ways. Consider **James 3:10** when the Apostle, speaking of the power of the tongue, states, “From the same mouth come blessing and cursing.”
  - Also, recall **Numbers 21:8** when God commanded Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” This was a good thing. In fact, we read in **John 3:14** that the serpent lifted up in the wilderness actually points to the crucifixion of

Jesus Christ. However, in 2 Kings 18:4, we read, “[Hezekiah] removed the high places and broke the pillars and cut down the Asherah. And he broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had make offerings to it.” In other words, something that was originally intended to point to Christ became an idol. And this is the essence of fallen man’s love affair with **everything but God**. We take that which was originally intended for God and use it in a way that is dishonoring to God.

- We can do this with respect to the most sacred of institutions as well. Consider our relationships. Even the relationship between parent and child and husband and wife can become “idolatrous” if we place greater emphasis on that human relationship than on our relationship with God Himself. In fact, this is why the Lord Himself said in Luke 14:26, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.”

## II. Abraham Obeyed God

- And, so the Lord tested Abraham, and rather than resisting, we read that **Abraham obeyed**.
- William Lane states, “When Abraham obeyed God’s mandate to leave Ur, he simply gave up his past. But when he was summoned to Mount Moriah to deliver his own son to God, he was asked to surrender his future as well.”
  - In fact, the author of Hebrews writes, “<sup>17</sup>By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son,”
    - The word translated “**offered him up**” is the same phrase used to speak of offering up a sacrifice or burnt offering.
    - But also, notice the phrase, “**he who had received the promise was in the act of offering up his only son**...” In other words, Abraham was not simply “going through the motions,” he was “**in the act of offering up his only son...**” That is, he was **fully obedient**.
    - Notice, as well, that he “was in the act of offering up **his only son**.” The word here translated “only son” is the Greek word *monogenes*, which is the same word found in John 3:16 to describe Jesus Christ. **Yet, Isaac was not Abraham’s only son; but Isaac was *unique*, in that he was the “son of the promise.”** And this is the meaning of the word for *monogenes* in this context – not that Isaac was Abraham’s only son, but that he was Abraham’s unique son.

- God promises Abraham a son named Isaac in Genesis 17:19, “...Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him...”
  - **This was the Promise.**
  - **Yet, with the command of God, there was a Dilemma: “If Isaac dies at the hands of his father as a human sacrifice (which raises moral questions of its own), how will the Promise be fulfilled?”**
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- This was a horrible Dilemma, indeed!
    - Matthew Henry writes, “After [Abraham] had received the promises that this Isaac should build up his family...and that...all nations blessed in Him; so that in being called to offer up his Isaac, he seemed to be called to destroy and cut off his own family, to cancel the promises of God, to prevent the coming of Christ, to destroy whole truth, to sacrifice his own soul and his hope for salvation, to cut off the church of God at one blow; a most terrible trial!”
    - Yet, **rather than challenging God’s wisdom, Abraham trusted that the LORD would work all things out in a manner consistent with His nature.** Abraham did not challenge God, He believed and exercised faith. As Arthur Pink explains, “Spiritual faith does not pick and choose: it fears God as well as loves Him.”
    - In Abraham’s faith, we certainly learn a priceless lesson. Richard Phillip notes, “On the one hand, faith obeys even without answers; but we also must oversee that faith gains understanding through God’s Word.”
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- From the account of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22 as well as Hebrews 11, we see that Abraham was confident that God **would do something miraculous.**
  - First of all, **Abraham had faith in the future because of what God had done in the past.** Likely Abraham, thought, “If God could create Isaac in the “dead” womb of Sarah, He can bring Him back from the dead.”
  - Secondly, in Genesis 22:7, Isaac asks one of the most moving questions in all of Scripture, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Yet, with the assurance of father of faith, Abraham

responded confidently in 22:8, “God will provide *for Himself* the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.”

- But, thirdly, read Genesis 22:5 (NASB): “<sup>5</sup> Abraham said to his young men, ‘Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go over there; and we will worship and return to you.’”
  - In this Verse, it is clear that Abraham had faith that God would give Isaac back to him, for he said, “we will worship and [**we**] return to you.”
  - It was through the exercise of faith, that Abraham gained understanding into the nature of God and His future purposes. Specifically, Abraham learned of **resurrection**.

The Puritan writer John Owen writes, “Abraham firmly believed, not only in the immortality of the souls of men, but also the resurrection from the dead. Had he not done so, he could have not gave been betaken himself unto this relief in his distress. Other things he might have thought of, wherein God might have exercised His power; but he could not believe that He would do it, in that which itself was not believed by him.”

- And what becomes clear here, is that Abraham was believing in a **BODILY RESURRECTION**, not merely a spiritual one (after all, Isaac was the child of the promise).
- What it appears is that what is a “dilemma” to us was seen as no “dilemma” to Abraham, for He knew God was **able to do the impossible**: i.e., raise Isaac from the dead.

Philip Hughes writes, “Because he enjoyed a proper relationship with God Abraham knew that God is altogether holy and just and loving and that he cannot be untrue to himself; and he realized that it was not for him, a sinful, finite creature, to query the word of his infinite Creator... This trial, in fact, so far from shaking Abraham’s faith, actually served to establish it, for though it the unchangeable character of God’s purpose and the impossibility that God should prove false to his promise became more than ever the great motivating realities to him.”

- Abraham’s trial seems to parallel a future trial of three young boys, recorded in Daniel 3:17-18. When commanded to bow to an idol or face the fiery furnace, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego said, “...our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king that we will not serve your gods...”

- And, this is precisely what the author of Hebrews says of Abraham, “**He [Abraham] considered that God was able even to raise him [Isaac] from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.**”

### III. God Blessed Abraham

- According to the Genesis 22 account, God provided a ram caught in a thicket as a substitutionary sacrifice on Mount Moriah.
- Furthermore, God blessed Abraham because of his obedience. For the Word says, in Genesis 22:16, “By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will multiple your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.”
- In A.W. Tozer’s, *The Pursuit of God*, Tozer writes of the “blessedness of possessing nothing”:

**There is within the human heart a tough fibrous root of fallen life whose nature is to possess, always to possess.** It covets ‘things’ with a deep and fierce passion. The pronouns ‘my’ and ‘mine’ look innocent enough in print, but their constant and universal use is significant. They express the real nature of the old Adamic man better than a thousand volumes of theology could do. They are verbal symptoms of our deep disease. The roots of our hearts have grown down into things, and we dare not pull up one rootlet lest we die. Things have become necessary to us, a development never originally intended. **God’s gifts now take the place of God, and the whole course of nature is upset by the monstrous substitution.**

**Abraham was old when Isaac was born, old enough indeed to have been his grandfather, and the child became at once the delight and idol of his heart.** From that moment when he first stooped to take the tiny form awkwardly in his arms he was an eager love slave of his son. God went out of His way to comment on the strength of this affection. And it is not hard to understand. The baby represented everything sacred to his father’s heart: the promises of God, the covenants, the hopes of the years and the long messianic dream. As he watched him grow from babyhood to young manhood the heart of the old man was knit closer and closer with the life of his son, till at last the relationship bordered upon the perilous. It was then that God stepped in to save both father and son from the consequences of an uncleansed love.

’Take now thy son,’ said God to Abraham, ‘thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt-offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.’ The sacred writer spares us a close-up of the agony that night on the slopes near Beersheba when the aged man had it out with his God, but respectful imagination may view in awe the bent form and convulsive wrestling alone under the stars. Possibly not again until a Greater than Abraham wrestled in the Garden

of Gethsemane did such mortal pain visit a human soul. If only the man himself might have been allowed to die. That would have been easier a thousand times, for he was old now, and to die would have been no great ordeal for one who had walked so long with God. Besides, it would have been a last sweet pleasure to let his dimming vision rest upon the figure of his stalwart son who would live to carry on the Abrahamic line and fulfill in himself the promises of God made long before in Ur of the Chaldees.

How should he slay the lad! Even if he could get the consent of his wounded and protesting heart, how could he reconcile the act with the promise, "In Isaac shall thy seed be called"? This was Abraham's trial by fire, and he did not fail in the crucible. While the stars still shone like sharp white points above the tent where the sleeping Isaac lay, and long before the gray dawn had begun to lighten the east, the old saint had made up his mind. He would offer his son as God had directed him to do, and then trust God to raise him from the dead. This, says the writer to the Hebrews, was the solution his aching heart found sometime in the dark night, and he rose 'early in the morning' to carry out the plan...

**God let the suffering old man go through with it up to the point where He knew there would be no retreat, and then forbade him to lay a hand upon the boy. To the wondering patriarch He now says in effect, 'It's all right, Abraham. I never intended that you should actually slay the lad. I only wanted to remove him from the temple of your heart that I might reign unchallenged there. I wanted to correct the perversion that existed in your love. Now you may have the boy, sound and well. Take him and go back to your tent. Now I know that thou fearest God, seeing that thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from me.'**

**I have said that Abraham possessed nothing. Yet was not this poor man rich? Everything he had owned before was his still to enjoy: sheep, camels, herds, and goods of every sort. He had also his wife and his friends, and best of all he had his son Isaac safe by his side. He had everything, but he possessed nothing.**

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- Because of Abraham's obedience, his **faith and understanding of God was deepened and strengthened**. He also knew the great blessing that we are to "possess" nothing and nothing is to possess us. In this truth there is endless freedom.
  - But it is also through the obedience of Abraham that God also **blesses us**.
    - The author of Hebrews writes, "He considered that God was able to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back." The word translated *figuratively* literally means *parable*. In other words, this is a parable pointing us to Christ.
    - Notice the nature of this parable as it points to Christ:

- The story of Abraham and Isaac teaches us that a sacrifice is required by God in order to propitiate His wrath against us because of our sins.
- Isaac was Abraham's *monogenes*, or "unique" son, in that he was the son of the promise. Similarly, John uses the same word to describe Jesus Christ as God's unique Son in John 3:16.
- Just as Christ carried the cross on His back up to Calvary, so Isaac carried the wood for the burnt offering on his back up to Mount Moriah, the place of the sacrifice.
- Just as the journey of Abraham and Isaac to Mount Moriah took three days, Christ was in the tomb for three days prior to His resurrection. (Notice the end of the three day journey for Abraham and Isaac culminated in Isaac's resurrection).

Writing in the second century A.D., Clement of Alexandria wrote that Isaac's "resurrection" was "an intimation of the divinity of the Lord...for Jesus rose again after his burial, having suffered no harm, like Isaac released from sacrifice."

- Mount Moriah would later become the location of Jerusalem, the Temple, and the place where the lambs were slaughtered, as well as Christ Himself.
- Finally, we see that the ram caught in the thicket was God's substitutionary sacrifice which He Himself provided for Himself.
- Given this parable of Abraham and Isaac, it is clear why God is called *Jehovah Jirah*, or "God will Provide." Indeed, Abraham had said, "God will provide **for Himself**" for in Jesus Christ, God provided for Himself that which man could never provide for himself.

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- And so, from the story of Abraham and Isaac we learn to put nothing – not even the godliest of all people and relationships, before Almighty God.
    - John Owen writes, "God says to us, 'My son, give me your heart' (Proverbs 23:26). And God commands us to love him with all our heart, soul, strength and mind (Luke 10:27). This is the response God wants from us in return for his love to us... This is love, that God loves us first, and then we love him in response to his love."
    - Arthur Pink rightly states, "The Lord has an absolute claim upon us, upon all that we have. As our Maker and Sovereign He has the right to demand from us anything He pleases, and whatsoever He requires we must yield."

All that we have comes from Him, and must be held for Him, and at His disposal...The bounty of God should encourage us to surrender freely whatever He calls for, for none ever lose by giving up anything to God.”

- Peter Lewish state, “The faith of Abraham may inspire us but it is the faith of Jesus that saves us, the Son who ‘humbled himself and became obedient unto death – even death on a cross’ (Philippians 2:8). There is no atonement on Moriah but on Golgotha there is a once-for-all and perfect sacrifice for sin; it was what was done *there* that saves Abraham and Isaac and you and me.”
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- John MacArthur writes, “When John Bunyan was in jail for preaching the gospel, he was deeply concerned about his family. He was particularly grieved about his little blind daughter, for whom he had a special love. He wrote, ‘I saw this condition I was a man who was pulling down his house upon the head of his wife and children. Yet, thought I, I must do it; I must do it. The dearest idol I have known, what err that idol be, help me to tear it from Thy throne and worship only Thee.’”
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### **The Day I Lay My Isaac Down**

by Lowell Alexander, Dave Clark, Bonnie Keen & Tony Wood  
Performed by Scott Krippayne.

I have a prayer as pure as gold  
That where You lead me I will go  
And I'll embrace the holy plea  
Each time your Spirit calls to me

And in that hour, and in that time  
When I must lose my will in Thine  
My true devotion will be found  
The day I lay my Isaac down

Your Lamb of Love, Thy blessed friend  
Nailed to the altar for each sin  
There in my place Your Son was bound  
The day You laid Your Isaac Down

Each sacrifice You call me to  
I'll die to self, I'll live for You  
Take up the cross, forsake the crown  
The day I lay my Isaac down

- ◆ May each of us pray that God would reveal the idols in our lives, even if they are the precious things of life that we might understand as Abraham and Jim Eliot did that **“He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”**