

Abraham & Isaac: A Test of Faith

DAVE BAST

One theologian has commented that anytime a writer in the Bible wanted to make a point about faith, they said, “Look at Abraham.” That is true: Paul, James, Hebrews, they all do that. Abraham’s life is one big illustration of what it means to live by faith. Today on Groundwork, we will see how that is true in one of the hardest stories in the whole Bible. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and Scott, we are in the midst of a series. We are still looking at Abraham. We are going to work our way through most of the book of Genesis. Obviously, there is a lot of material there, so we are skipping quite a bit; but what we really want to do is look at these great Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – and maybe a little bit of Joseph, too, at the end. So, we are still today – this is the second program in the series – and we are looking at Abraham’s example of faith.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And last time we saw the multiple challenges that Abraham and Sarah faced. God started the whole thing by kicking them out of the only home they had ever known; and then God promised them a child and made them wait 25 years before the kid was born, and by the time he was, they were 100 years old and 90 years old respectively – Abraham and Sarah. But finally the kid is born and we concluded the last program with the joyous birth of Laughter – Isaac – his name means laughter, and it is joyful and it is great, and that was Genesis 21, and then comes Genesis 22.

DAVE BAST

Right. One of the truly dramatic and traumatic – I would say dramatic and traumatic – chapters of the whole Bible because God now requires Abraham to sacrifice this gift that he has received and to give up Isaac. So, let’s just read the story, one of the most disturbing stories, really, in the whole Old Testament, then see what we can make of it.

^{22:1}Some time later, - we read in Genesis 22:1 – God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham,” “Here I am,” he replied. ²Then God said, “Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.” ³Early the next morning, Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son, Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. ⁴On the third day, Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. ⁵He said to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁶Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, ⁷Isaac spoke up and said to his father, Abraham, “Father,” “Yes, my son,” “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” ⁸Abraham answered, “God Himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son;” and the two of them

went on together. ⁹When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son, Isaac and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. ¹⁰Then he reached out his hand and he took the knife to slay his son, ¹¹but the Angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, “Abraham, Abraham.” “Here I am,” he replied. ¹²“Do not lay a hand on the boy. Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God because you did not withhold from me your son, your only son.” ¹³ And Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴And so Abraham called the place: The Lord Will Provide; and to this day it is said on the mountain of the Lord, it will be provided.

DAVE BAST

Wow, yes; what do we say about this story? It certainly provokes some hard questions; and again, the Bible is so interesting, too, in addition to being difficult. I mean, here is this whole theme of Abraham having to go out and leave, and now God calls him out again and he has to leave where he is living and go to this place that God will show him; and he does not know exactly where he is going; and now he has to bring his son. It is very important, I think, to understand that Isaac is the son.

It says here, “Take Isaac, your only son.” Well, that was not literally true. He had an earlier son, Ishmael, an older son. That was part of his attempt to make God’s promise come true on his own; but as far as the promise of God is concerned, it is only Isaac – it is all bound up in Isaac.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and this is a hard, hard story; but what I always find interesting re-reading it just now as we just did, the text does not spare the horses here. It does not make it easier; it drives it home: Take your son – your only son – Isaac, whom you love. It is like hammer blow, hammer blow, hammer blow. This is a hard thing. And somebody once noted, the Bible itself, and the biblical authors and the Holy Spirit who inspired the Bible – what a gutsy, risky thing, to put a story this hard – only 21 chapters in – you have read 21 chapters out of the whole Bible, and you hit this?! A lot of people would be tempted to close the Bible and say: I am done with that book. But, there was enough faith in God that they dared put in a story this scandalous so early.

DAVE BAST

Well, it is scandalous, too. You know the original meaning of that word: Stumbling block...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, scandal...

DAVE BAST

Scandalon, and it trips us up; and we start with questions about God, I think. Did He really command this? I mean, how could He possibly...

SCOTT HOEZEE

How could He?!

DAVE BAST

Yes. We know – those of us who know the rest of the story – and that, incidentally, would have included the first readers of Genesis – all the Hebrew people. They knew that God abhorred child sacrifice. It was one of the things for which He was judging the inhabitants of Canaan. Yes, absolutely. They did this abominable thing of burning their children in the fire – offering them as burnt offerings to their idols, and God totally rejects that. So, now He turns around and commands Abraham to do it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, we are left to wonder what is God up to? We know ultimately from other parts of scripture that the true sacrifice God always wants is not animals – and certainly not children – but the human heart. So there is a testing that we will talk about in a little bit. There is a testing going on here, but we wonder about God, and

we will wonder more about that in just a few minutes; but then we also wonder about Abraham. The biblical text is always kind of terse. We do not get the background. We are not given lots of descriptions. Maybe – and probably he did – maybe after getting this command, maybe Abraham went and hit a wall or wept or went screaming into the fields or something because this was driving him crazy.

DAVE BAST

Or prayed for a while to make sure he was hearing right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; we are not told. The text presents him as being almost robotic. God says: Abraham. Here am I. Go do this. Okay. And boom, boom, boom, boom. And that is a sign of Abraham's faithfulness, but surely every emotion the man had had to be churning in him. This is a hard test.

DAVE BAST

Right. Frankly, if Abraham were a modern trying to carry this out, we would lock him up as criminally insane. In fact, that has happened. There was actually a story in the village history where I served a church of a man who did just this. He thought God – this was 100 years ago – but they locked him away after he killed his son, and rightly so.

Yes, again, we are not given the psychology of it. We are not told about Abraham's reaction or how he struggled. Somehow he knew that this was legit. This was the voice of God, and certainly Abraham had heard it enough to recognize it when he heard it. It is nothing that we take away and think: Oh, yeah, we can do the same. It is a one-off. It is an unrepeatable, unique kind of a test.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is a high-stakes environment here because we know as readers of the text, but Abraham knew too, the salvation of the whole universe is at stake in how things go with Abraham and Isaac. So, maybe we would expect something very one-time, one-off unusual would happen, including what this is often referred to as a test of faith, and we will wonder more about why it is called that in just a moment.

BREAK:

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to Groundwork, and we are talking about Genesis 22 today, that powerful chapter, the story of Abraham's faith being tested by the offering up of Isaac as a sacrifice to God, and it is a test because it says that right in Genesis, in the first place in verse 1: Sometime later God tested Abraham. And it also says it in Hebrews, which refers to this story: By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac. So, what is the deal, Scott? How is this a test of faith? How is it functioning as a test?

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is a huge text. Judaism – the Jews to this day – refer to this as the *akadeh*, which is Hebrew for *the binding*, and it is a seminal text for both Christians and Jews; and it is a test. Why would God, who knows everything – this is the question I always have – if God knows everything, why would He have to test? And maybe it sort of reminds me of a question somebody once asked a rabbi about the story of the fall in Genesis 3, when God, after Adam and Eve had eaten the forbidden fruit and God comes and says: Adam, where are you? Somebody asked a rabbi: Why did God have to ask where Adam is? Didn't He know? And the rabbi said: Oh, God knew. It was Adam who did not know where he was. So maybe this test was also partly for the sake of Abraham, to show him how far he had come.

DAVE BAST

Yes, I do not think it was a test to prove to God whether or not Abraham had faith.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Although the biblical text will talk that way: Now I know...

DAVE BAST

Now I know, right. Well, to a certain extent, though, it has to be proved by performance, right? It is not words; it is deeds that really are the measure of faith. Doesn't James say something about that?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, he has often commented on that.

DAVE BAST

But Abraham also will now learn what it means to live and walk by faith; and to me, here is the essence of it – the struggle. It is to reconcile what God had promised was going to happen through Isaac with the possibility – the experience that Abraham was living through. He is walking through the experience, essentially, of losing Isaac. So, how do you reconcile that? That is a struggle for us, for our faith, when all of the good things that God seems to promise us do not come true, and instead we experience loss and suffering and hardship.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Isaac, Isaac was a real boy. He was a real boy; but of course, biblically – and Abraham knew this, too – so biblically Isaac is also kind of shorthand for the whole covenant – the whole future of the universe, whether God is going to redeem this fallen creation or not, it all hangs on that kid, and God's being able to eventually build a mighty nation out of that kid. So, it is not just Abraham's beloved son, although it is that, too, but it is also the whole covenant. Will Abraham have enough faith in God now that it is going to happen, even though Abraham has been asked to do something totally paradoxical – totally insane, in a way, for a human person to do – but does he trust God enough?

You know, Dave, one thing we often forget is that between Genesis 12, when Abram is first called and this point, actually even though he is the father of the faith and all the things we talked about in the last program, Abraham had a lot of failures along the way.

DAVE BAST

Right; yes. For an example of faith, he is pretty uneven. There were a couple of times when he left the Promised Land – wait a minute, I thought you were supposed to go there, Abraham – No, things got rough; there was famine; so one time he goes off to Egypt and another time he goes to a neighboring kingdom – and in both cases, he tries to pass off his wife, Sarah, as his sister because he is afraid somebody will kill him and take her. She is still desirable despite her age. So, that was not exactly a shining moment of faith.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And, we mentioned this earlier, they had that 25-year waiting period between first being promised a child and then actually getting it; and as the years went by and it seemed less and less likely, eventually even Sarah came to Abraham and said: This is not going to happen. I do not care what God said about me having a kid, I am not going to; so you go have a kid with somebody else. Take my servant, Hagar. And so, Abraham does, and God comes to him and says: No, no, no, no. I told you, it is going to be Sarah. So, despite being a paragon and symbol of faith, Abraham was a human being, too; and he failed along the way. He did not trust God enough. He was afraid. He was doubtful. He went where he was not supposed to go; and now, Isaac is here and we are on the cusp of the covenant and moving forward into a new generation through Isaac, and now God wants to show Abraham, you have come a long way.

DAVE BAST

Yes; because here he does pass the test, certainly. He rises to the occasion and he shines forth; and as you read the story, I just find it so gripping. There is poignance here, and I think the writer of Genesis is masterful just in the way the story is told. It grips our heart and then it squeezes and squeezes again. There is this sense

of their going together, together, together – that is repeated; and we know, apparently only one will be coming back, and as you mentioned earlier: Take your son, the one you love...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, your only son...

DAVE BAST

Your only son. So, the tension builds, and he actually is standing there with a knife raised when the Angel grabs his hand figuratively and says, "Stop, wait."

SCOTT HOEZEE

And what is amazing, too, is that, okay, as we said a minute ago, this is a high-stakes environment. This is the whole covenant. This is, really – the salvation of the cosmos is hanging in the balance here; therefore maybe it is not that unusual that we would get a test that is very unusual. You would expect when the future of the whole universe is on the line, something big is going to happen; but the fact of the matter is, that for us, you know, Dave, our lives are still a test. You do not have to have God ask you to do something extraordinary – you do not have to sacrifice something – when you live by the promises of God, as we Christians still do – we live in the already and the not-yet; the kingdom has come, but we do not see it. When you live in a broken world yet, every day, in a way, is a test; and some of us pass through periods of cancer, periods of brokenness in our children's lives, periods of unemployment – you name it, and we are always sort of saying: I know God's promises. I believe God is faithful, but then, why this?

DAVE BAST

Yes...

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it is hard.

DAVE BAST

Well, the loss of a child – I have never had to go through that, but that has got to be the hardest thing of all, and many times believers experience that. They walk through that valley. We are not promised that we will be spared anything – any of the pains and shocks that can come in the midst of this life – but the test comes in whether or not we go on believing God, even when things have gone against us or we have experienced loss. Sometimes people can get the idea that faith means believing God because of all that He has done for you, or all He will do for you, and I often have thought: No, it really means believing God in spite of what may be happening to you or what you may be experiencing. So, yes, going on and continuing to trust that God is good and that it will end in laughter, as we saw last time with Isaac – the laughing boy. Weeping may endure for the night, but joy comes in the morning, as the psalmist says. That is real faith; that is Bible faith.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There is one more thing that we want to talk about in this story, and we will look at that in just a moment.

BREAK:

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are talking about one of the hardest chapters in all of scripture; one of the earliest chapters in all of scripture. The Bible did not wait too long to give us a hard story, and we get it in Genesis 22 – the binding –

the sacrifice of Isaac – I guess you would call it the near-sacrifice of Isaac; and there is one other point that we should talk about, and this is interesting, from Hebrews Chapter 11, where the writer of the Hebrews wrote:

¹⁷He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, ¹⁸even though God had said to him, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” ¹⁹Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, Abraham did receive Isaac back from the dead.

DAVE BAST

Yes, I love that comment on it. One of the basic rules for me in trying to understand the Bible, especially the Old Testament, is look to see if it is mentioned anywhere in the New Testament, and follow their lead. The real test of faith for Abraham came in whether or not he could go on believing in God’s promises to him that were all wrapped up in Isaac, even if he should lose Isaac; and he did. Hebrews says what went on in Abraham’s mind and heart was the conviction that even if he plunged the knife into Isaac’s chest, God would literally raise him from the dead. That was the strength with which he believed in the promise of God. He was just utterly convinced that God is truthful and will do what He says.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Probably in his heart, Abraham had already experienced all the grief he would ever experience just by having gotten to that point. How is he ever going to explain this to Sarah? How is he going to go on without this boy of his old age that was the light of his life? He had already lost him in his heart, and it must have almost killed Abraham. So, he did kind of receive him back from the dead, and so it ends up being a death and resurrection story, and I think the Bible has another one of those later on.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I think that puts me in mind of one, but this great phrase in Hebrews: Figuratively speaking, Abraham did receive Isaac back from the dead. Literally that phrase could be translated in the form of a parable, and that points us to the deeper meaning of this story; and again, we see it. You cannot help but see if you know the whole of scripture and where the trajectory of the covenant is going. Here is this substitute. Isaac says to his father: Look, we have fire here – and of course, they did not have matches. They had to carry some kind of fire bundle. We have wood, where is the sacrifice? And Abraham says to him, “The Lord will provide it.” On the mountain of the Lord, it will be provided, says the writer, to clench the story. Jehovah-Jireh – The Lord Will Provide – and the sacrifice is provided, provisionally, we might say. It is a ram, but that is only temporary. We know ultimately the deeper story of death and resurrection, where the Lord Himself provided Himself as the sacrifice.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We noted earlier that this is a hard story all by itself, but the text just kind of hammers it home, and one of the ways my teacher, Ray Van Leeuwen pointed out, that in Hebrew it is very, very clever, and you mentioned this earlier, Dave. Two times at least as they are going to the mountain, the writer says that Abraham and Isaac went, and the little Hebrew word there is *yahdaw*; they went together – father and son together – it is like a Norman Rockwell painting or the opening of The Andy Griffith Show, where Sheriff Taylor and his little boy walking down...

DAVE BAST

Opie, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, he and Opie together – so, twice we are told Abraham and Isaac went together, and then a couple of verses later, and so they went on together, and it breaks your heart because you know if this happens, they will not come back together; Abraham will come back alone. The writer keeps saying this story cannot end happily, but – and we did not read this verse earlier – but the last verse of this story, after the ram has been provided, the writer says one more time: And so, Abraham and Isaac left the mountain *together* – and it is like: Oh, the story ended happily after all; and of course, the same things happens in the Gospel. The

disciples watch Jesus die on a different mountain not far from Mount Moriah, on Golgotha, on Skull Hill, and everybody is thinking this story cannot end happily. That is a sad ending for that Jesus guy. It cannot be a happy ending; and then it is, by grace.

DAVE BAST

Right; that is a significant point. You know, Mount Moriah, where this story of Abraham and Isaac took place, was one of the hills on which Jerusalem was built, and Jewish tradition says it was actually the Temple mountain, where later Solomon erected the Temple; and there was another hill, as we all know, just outside the city where another Son walked up carrying the wood of the sacrifice, and where the Father did not stay His hand because it could not be stayed. If we are to have the blessings that God has promised, the covenant joy of salvation, a happy ending to us... So Jesus died. That is the reality of which Abraham's story is a figure, and as you said, Scott, we praise God endlessly that it had a happy ending because the power of God was such that He would not leave Him. He would not suffer His Son to see decay.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I once – and I may have mentioned this in a previous program – but I once heard a scholar say: In the Bible, words and phrases – if you think of a piano keyboard – they never sound a single note; they always form chords, and other notes; so here in Genesis 22, when Abraham says God Himself will provide, we hear not just that from Abraham, we hear the other chord being formed in the New Testament when Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world came, and because He was sacrificed, nobody will ever have to sacrifice anything like that again. God has made all things well through grace alone.

DAVE BAST

Yes, the harmonic of that chord – the string that vibrates is Romans 8:32: God did not spare His own Son, but freely gave Him up for us all; will He not also freely give us all things with Him? And that is what we hang onto. There is the ultimate promise. God is going to give us everything. He has already proved it by giving His Son for us, so whatever you are experiencing, hang onto that promise and go on living in faith.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. So, visit groundworkonline.com and tell us what topics or passages you would like to dig into next on Groundwork.

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