

## “By Faith Abraham Obeyed”

GENESIS 12:1-4; 22:9-18; HEBREWS 11:8-22

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Congregation of Christ: Liberals are known to reject the Bible as the inspired and inerrant Word of God. Instead, they argue that the Bible was written by fallible men, so there are errors and contradictions. Take for example this quote from a professor at a liberal university who wrote recently, “The book of Genesis was written during the period of the monarchy... for the purpose of *setting up and defending the very idea of a monarchy*. [The stories] were **recast and shaped** into their present form during the monarchic period *for the purpose of explaining and defending the present...* The promise to Abraham was written with the monarchy in view—*not predictively but retrospectively*” (**emphasis added**).

So our esteemed Old Testament professor says that the Book of Genesis—as we have it today—was written by Moses. But during the time of Kings David and Solomon, it was revised to justify their reigns. So much for the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture!

Last Sunday, we began our study of Hebrews 11 with a definition of faith as “*the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*.” Then the author gives the first three examples of faithful men: Abel, Enoch and Noah. Today, we continue to look at another member of the “Hall of Faith,” a lengthy explanation of the faith given by God to Abraham. Abraham evidenced his faith by obeying God twice. The first one is God’s call for him to move out of his homeland into an unknown land of promise. The second command was even more difficult than the first: sacrifice his only son Isaac to the Lord as a burnt offering.

Abraham passed both tests with flying colors. And God confirmed his promise to him to bless him with a multitude of descendants, and all his descendants with a land of their own.

### God’s Call to be a Stranger and an Exile on Earth

God first called Abraham in Genesis 12:1, “*Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you*.” Back in Genesis 11, Abraham’s father Terah and his family left Ur of the Chaldeans in present-day southern Iraq to go to Canaan, about 1,000 miles west. From archaeological findings, Ur was a city of great wealth, craftsmanship and technology. But for reasons unknown, he settled in the city of Haran 600 miles north in present-day southern Turkey.

But we know from Stephen’s speech before the Jewish high court that God commanded Abraham to go to an unknown land while he was still in Ur, saying, “*The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran*” (Acts 7:2). Without any complaint or argument, he left his father’s family and country. Genesis 12:4 simply says, “*So Abram went, as the Lord told him*.” He was already 75 years old, and Sarah his wife, was 66. And verse 8 says he went, “*not knowing where he was going*.” It’s as if one day God told you to pack everything up and go down south with your family. When you reach Mexico, you ask God, “Are we there yet?” God says no. When you reach Colombia, God still

says no. When you reach Santiago, Chile, you ask again, "This is the southernmost capital in the world. Are we there yet?" To your amazement, God says no. Finally, you reach Tierra Del Fuego, one of the southernmost places on earth, and God tells you, "This is the place!"

Abraham believed God's promises in Genesis 12:1-3. There were two main promises. The first was, *"I will make of you a great nation."* This promise included blessing him and making his name great. But the Preacher there was a problem with both of them: Abraham was *"as good as dead"* and Sarah was *"past the age."* They were past childbearing age (v 11-12). But Abraham and Sarah, though after 11 years had some doubts about childbearing, believed that God would give them *"descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore."* This was how Abraham was blessed to be "a great nation." Today, after 4,000 years, his name is still great among Jews, Christians and even Muslims.

The second main promise is, *"all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you."* How did God fulfill this promise? It was through Abraham's "seed" who is Christ our Savior. In Galatians 3:16, we read, *"now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' who is Christ."* Through Christ, multitudes from all nations became Abraham's children, heirs of the promises made to him, *"And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise"* (Gal 3:29). All Jews and Gentiles like us are Abraham's children through faith in Christ alone as Savior.

Another part of the promise to Abraham of being great and blessed is, *"I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."* Many evangelicals believe that the nation Israel today is still God's chosen people, they wrongly apply this verse to American foreign in the Middle East or in the Arab-Israeli conflict. They wrongly believe that America will be blessed or cursed by God depending on its treatment of Israel. But this promise to Abraham has everything to do with the church, God's people today: how Christians are to bless other Christians, and how unbelievers are hostile to, and even persecute and martyr Christians.

When Abraham reached Canaan, what did he do? Verse 9 says, *"by faith [Abraham] went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise."* It was hard enough for his household to leave the wealthy cities of Ur and Haran. It was even harder to settle in a foreign land by living in tents. This is as if you traveled all the way from Big Springs to Tierra Del Fuego in Chile in a camper, but when you get there, you live in the same camper for the rest of your life!

Why did Abraham do that to his family? The writer tells us in verse 10, *"For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God."* In Genesis 15:7, God made a covenant with Abraham, with a promise to give his children a land that extended from Canaan south to the border of Egypt and east to the Euphrates River, as big as California and Montana combined. But according to Stephen, during his life and the lives of his children

Isaac and Jacob, God *"gave him no inheritance... not even a foot of ground"* (Acts 7:5). The only property that Abraham owned in his life was Sarah's tomb, a cave near Hebron (Genesis 23).

Though he lived in the land, he lived in tents with his family. He lived a different life from his neighbors. He worshipped one God, the creator in heaven, not many man-made gods. His life was based on God's law, not man-made laws. His life was a life that Paul calls non-conformed to this world, but transformed by the renewing of his mind through the Spirit (Rom 12:1-2). He was an alien, a stranger, a sojourner, an exile (1 Pet 1:1, 17; 2:11), a "pilgrim in that barren land," a land where God does not pour out his spiritual blessings, except to Abraham and his household.

We too must be counter-cultural, *in* this world, but not *of* this world. We ought to be like him, one who was truly "set apart" by God to be holy and righteous, different from the godless world around us. May we reflect this "set-apartness" by our mindset and behavior among our unbelieving neighbors, so they too would ask why we think and behave so differently from them (1 Pet 3:15).

Abraham obeyed because of God's promise of a land, but ultimately, his gaze was heavenward, *"he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God"* (v 10). And his desire was *"a better country, that is, a heavenly one"* (v 16). The only city that has eternal foundations is the heavenly, not earthly, Jerusalem. It is a better country because God himself designed and built it. There, we will dwell with God forever. All people in that country will be of one faith, one Lord, one mind, and all will be in perfect communion with God and with one another. No more conflicts, sufferings, persecution, and death. No more living in tents and campers. There, we would have arrived, no longer aliens, strangers, sojourners and pilgrims, but full-fledged citizens of heaven.

### **God's Command to Offer Up a Christ-Like Sacrifice**

If leaving family and country to go to a land unknown was difficult, God's second command was even more difficult: *"Take your 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"* (Gen 22:2).

Here he was, after waiting 25 years for his covenant son to be born, getting another impossible task. He and his wife were way past childbearing age, but he had faith in the God of the impossible. Verse 11 is translated differently in most versions. NIV: *"By faith Abraham, even though he was past age—and Sarah herself was barren—was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise."* KJV: *"Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised."* ESV is similar to the KJV. The NIV rendering is better because the original literally says what was received was *"the power for the deposition of seed."* This is obviously a male function, so Abraham was the main subject, not Sarah. His

faith was the subject, because he was already 99, and Sarah was 90! Sarah even laughed at God's promise, and later offered her servant Hagar to bear a child for Abraham.

Again, just as when God commanded him to leave his country, Abraham went out with his Isaac and a servant to the mountains of Moriah without a question (Gen 22:3). How could he have obeyed this command without doubting God's faithfulness? Isaac was the fulfillment of God's promise, and now he would be dead. Verse 19 has the answer, *"He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back."* Abraham believed that God is able to raise Isaac even after he was slaughtered and burned as a sacrifice. He believed in the resurrection! Earlier in Genesis 15:6, Abraham *"believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness."*

After the angel of the Lord restrained him, Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked behind him, there was a ram caught in a thicket by his horns. He knew immediately that God himself had provided a substitute for his son. He took the ram and offered it to God as a burnt offering, a thanksgiving to God for providing a ram sacrifice, instead of his only son. If the ram was a substitute for Isaac, our Lord Jesus Christ is the Substitute for us, who deserve to die because of our sins. But God is merciful to his people, so he himself provided Christ for us as the once-for-all sacrifice for all our sins (Gal 3:13).

Fast forward about 1,000 years. David was now King of Israel. In 1 Chronicles 21, David orders an unlawful census of all the men of Israel who could bear the sword to see how powerful he was. God was displeased, and 70,000 Israelites were killed by a plague. David repented of his sin, and on the threshing floor of a man named Ornan the Jebusite, he built an altar and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings to the Lord. The location of this field is the same Mount Moriah where Abraham offered Isaac as a sacrifice. And this Mount Moriah, called *"the mount of the Lord"* (Gen 22:14), is the location of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem (2 Chr 3:1). Isaiah 2:3 prophesied that this same *"mountain of the Lord"* will be called Zion. Even the people of God today are called Mount Zion (Heb 12:22).

We learned from Hebrews 8 that the temple, the priesthood, and the sacrifices were made obsolete by Christ who is the superior Temple, the superior High Priest and the superior Sacrifice. Therefore, the thread of God's redemptive plan for his people goes through Abraham's faith in his obedience at Mount Moriah, through the temple at Mount Zion, and through the Mount of Calvary where our Lord was crucified.

On this same Mount Moriah, Isaac carried the wood where he would be laid down by his Father as a sacrifice. On this same Mount Moriah, Jesus carried his own cross on his back. On this same Mount Moriah, where Abraham sacrificed Isaac and the Temple built, Jesus the Passover Lamb and the Temple of God became our Substitute, *"the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world"* (John 1:29).

We too are called by our Substitute to carry our own cross of sufferings, trials, temptations until the end, *"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up*

*his cross daily and follow me.*" And when we persevere, we will attain the glory of Christ's cross on Mount Moriah.

## **Therefore, God is Not Ashamed to be Called His God**

After Abraham passed this impossible test, God rewarded him saying, *now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.*" His faith has been completed by his obedience. *"Now I know that you fear God."* Beautiful words to the ears of Abraham! How beautiful to our ears when at the end of our days, we hear the same words from God as Jesus also welcomes us, *"Well done, good and faithful servant... Enter into the joy of your master"* (Matt 25:21).

Our reward for faithfulness to the end are these words, *"therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God."* When God revealed himself to Moses, he declared, *"I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob"* (Exo 3:6). What a tribute to all of us who have faith in God and Christ when he declares, "I am the God of \_\_\_\_\_!" Fill in the blank with your name!

God is not ashamed to say, "I am your God, and you are my people." Even when you are disobedient and disciplined by God, he still calls you "My people." In Revelation 2:19, he will give you who "conquer" "a new name," because you are "a new creation" in Christ (2 Cor 5:17). All the old things—sin, temptation, sufferings—are removed and replaced by new things—perfect righteousness and blessings in the heavenly places. Because you persevered, your name is also registered forever in God's "book of life" (Rev 3:5).

Jesus promises you in Matthew 10:32, *"So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven."* The Preacher also assures you in Hebrews 2:11-12 that when Christ presents you before his Father's heavenly throne, *"he is not ashamed to call [you] brothers, saying, 'I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.'"* Our Lord also promises to you, *"I will confess [your] name before my Father and before his angels"* (Rev 3:5).

**D**ear Friends: God also calls us to live like Abraham did. Our ultimate gaze must always be our permanent place, the heavenly city (Heb 11:9-10, 13). Though we live in our own homes and own cars and other earthly possessions, we must acknowledge that all of these are temporary and *"passing away"* (1 John 2:16-17). We are dual citizens: citizens of heaven first (Eph 2:19; Phil 3:20), and citizens of our nation second (Rom 13:1-7).

As you think about your life as "pilgrims through this barren land," I leave you with these exhortations. From Colossians 3:1-2, *"If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth."* From Romans 8:5, *"For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit."*