

GENESIS—WEEK 17

ABRAHAM FINALLY GETS IT



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Cover Picture is The Angel Prevents the Sacrifice of Isaac by Rembrandt Harmensz, van Rijn (1606 – 1669) On display at Alte Pinakothek, Munich

Abraham’s lesson in faith reaches its climax, and he learns it well. His willingness to sacrifice Isaac shows he knows that God doesn’t need his “help” to keep His promises. He’s now the father of faith and is ready to move on.

Unfortunately, that includes burying Sarah.

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Thank you.

Genesis 22:4–23:16 — Abraham Finally Gets it
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1 Genesis 22:4–8 (ESV)

On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.” 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 they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, “My father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham said, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So they went both of them together.

Everything so far has been leading up to this moment—all the lies and failures and embarrassments. There’s no weaseling out of this one; either you trust God or you don’t. Abraham is finally ready for an advanced lesson. This is the ultimate educational experience; if Abraham can get through this test, he’ll be a rock.

But right now he’s as tense as a cat in a bathtub. He doesn’t know what God is going to do. He’s aware of God’s ability to raise Isaac from the dead (see Hebrews 11:19), but surely is hoping and praying that it doesn’t come to that.

So here he is not knowing what’s going to happen next, and Isaac blurts out, “*Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?*” Bang. That’s the other thing Abraham has been dreading. Even before he gets to the actual sacrifice, he has to get through the moment when Isaac figures out what’s going on. His question shows that he’s getting close.

Abraham’s answer puts him off—but not for long. The tension is unbearable.

Notice that this test exists entirely in Abraham’s mind. There’s no physical pain, not even much physical work. No one gets hurt (in the end). There’s no cost and no physical suffering. It’s all about fear and anticipation. Abraham has no idea what’s going to happen next; he just has to trust God. This means believing that God is really there and is fully God.

We face similar trials. While many of our trials involve real pain or loss, some do not. Often we are stressed by the anticipation of something bad. Our ability to anticipate is generally a good thing, and should never be ignored, but we should still recognize it for what it is.

God tests his servants. While tests can be stressful, they’re not necessarily punishments. Our job as servants of Christ is to face them with courage, righteousness and faith.

This isn’t about trying harder; it’s about seeing tests through the eyes of a believer and depending on God. Prayer is the backbone of the proper response to a trial.

Never stop asking God to help you cope and to help you see what He’s up to.

2 Genesis 22:9–14 (ESV)

When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place, “The LORD will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.”

Now the story climaxes, and, amazingly, Isaac doesn’t say a word. How is that possible? He’s inquisitive enough to have wondered about the lamb. Surely, he wouldn’t have let Abraham tie him up without comment. When Abraham laid him on the altar, Isaac must have said something. Could the Bible have just left this out?

No. Such a great omission is impossible in inspired scripture. Isaac was silent. How can that be?

One clue is that there is no mention, anywhere in the Bible, of Isaac remembering this incident. It’s as if he was drugged or something, though the text doesn’t say what. Thus, this looks like a miracle.

If so, it’s just one of many. There’s really no need to expect things to be normal here. Abraham’s test is already extreme beyond anyone’s imagination. God supernaturally limits the test to what Abraham can handle; Isaac is somehow incapacitated. Wrestling with Isaac would be pointless anyway.

God wants to test Abraham, not give him a heart attack.

Abraham passes the test, and God bails him out in the nick of time. At last Abraham gets it. Implementing his new understanding, he names the place, “*The LORD will provide.*”

This is a precious gift. When God came through at the last second, Abraham’s faith was cemented. The sudden release of tension, combined with the clear display of God’s goodness, seared the moment into his memory. It’ll be a “doubt eraser” for the rest of his life.

Or, at least it should be. Somehow, memories always fade—no matter how spectacular and important they may be. We all do it. We climb down off the mountains God has lifted us up to and forget the lessons learned there. We let great gifts rust.

What can we do to keep these lessons from fading? Abraham named the location. Building an altar is another classic Old Testament method.

And note that these monuments aren’t idols. When you create something to memorialize God’s provision, it isn’t meant to be an object of worship. Otherwise, holidays would be prohibited.

3 Genesis 22:15–19 (NKJV)

Then the Angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time out of heaven, and said: “By Myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son— blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.” So Abraham returned to his young men, and they rose and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham dwelt at Beersheba.

Abraham has passed the test. The LORD Himself declares this to be the ultimate act of faith. The whole Bible declares this to be the ultimate act of faith. But why? Sure, what Abraham did was impressive, but why does this make him the father of faith? Why is this act of faith so special?

Because it’s the opposite of what he did with Hagar. That time, Abraham tried to help God keep His promise. That was totally faithless. If the LORD is God, He can keep His own promises.

But on Mount Moriah, Abraham was ready to do something that would, without divine intervention, destroy the promise. That was just as totally faithful. This time, God’s promise will be kept only if God keeps it.

And Abraham didn’t know what was going to happen next. Sure, we know from Hebrews 11:19 that he knew *that God was able even to raise him from the dead*—God **is able to** do lots of things—but Abraham didn’t know **what** He was going to do.

In other words, Abraham didn’t have a hand-hold. He had nothing to cling to. He had to let go of all expectation and all understanding. God said, “Trust me,” in a situation where the normal response is, “No way! This is nuts!”

But this wasn’t just anyone saying, “Trust me.” It was the LORD himself, and if He is who He says He is, the normal response doesn’t apply. So Abraham let go of everything rational and did what God told him to do.

That’s faith, baby.

You don’t really know that parachutes work until you’ve jumped out of an airplane. That’s how faith works—and how it grows through practice.

But you have to jump, and it takes a lot of faith to jump in the first place. How are we to get the faith to jump before we’ve actually jumped?

That’s the miracle of the action of the Holy Spirit. The faithless discover faith. The dead come to life.

But then comes the jump. Chicken out and your faith stays stuck at the beginner stage.

4 Genesis 22:20–24 (NKJV)

Now it came to pass after these things that it was told Abraham, saying, “Indeed Milcah also has borne children to your brother Nahor: Huz his firstborn, Buz his brother, Kemuel the father of Aram, Chesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph, and Bethuel.” And Bethuel begot Rebekah. These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham’s brother. His concubine, whose name was Reumah, also bore Tebah, Gaham, Thahash, and Maachah.

God’s promise feels different now. Abraham knows, really knows, that his descendants will be *as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore*. Then he finds out that his brother Nahor is already doing pretty good in the descendants game. This is great news. In their culture, large families are a principal sign of God’s blessing.

It has been a long and winding road to this point, but Abraham has reached the end and has discovered real faith, which is credited to him as righteousness. That’s a good thing, since his own righteousness has been pretty much AWOL the whole time.

By almost any standard, Abraham is a lousy hero. Yet the Bible holds him up as a prime example for us to follow. This is precisely where the Biblical point of view and the worldly point of view part company. Understand this, and you understand the foundation of the gospel.

The world admires things like hard work and honesty. We like those things too, but there’s a problem. The problem isn’t the hard work and honesty; it’s the admiring. We admire people for doing the obvious.

For example, do you drive with your eyes open or closed? Open, of course. Should you get a medal for that? Why not? Open is much better than closed.

From a Biblical perspective, admiring people for hard work and honesty is like admiring them for driving with their eyes open. Doing things right is better than doing them wrong, but it’s nothing special. Besides, we don’t do things right all that often anyway.

But there is something that’s special—faith. Faith is really all about not admiring ourselves and accepting the lordship of the only one who really knows what He’s doing.

Abraham is done admiring himself. He’s seen the light.

We can memorize this doctrine until we’re blue in the face and still not get it. It seems that only total failure can hammer this one in. So, in a perverse twist, a good way to teach the faith-based gospel is to give the works-based gospel a try. In failing, we learn the crucial lesson—the works gospel doesn’t work.

But that’s a slow and painful path. Praying about it is much more efficient. Ask God to open your eyes to your inability to conform to a works-based gospel.

But beware, that can get painful too.

5 Genesis 23:1–16 (ESV)

Sarah lived 127 years; these were the years of the life of Sarah. And Sarah died at Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her. And Abraham rose up from before his dead and said to the Hittites, “I am a sojourner and foreigner among you; give me property among you for a burying place, that I may bury my dead out of my sight.” The Hittites answered Abraham, “Hear us, my lord; you are a prince of God among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our tombs. None of us will withhold from you his tomb to hinder you from burying your dead.” Abraham rose and bowed to the Hittites, the people of the land. And he said to them, “If you are willing that I should bury my dead out of my sight, hear me and entreat for me Ephron the son of Zohar, that he may give me the cave of Machpelah, which he owns; it is at the end of his field. For the full price let him give it to me in your presence as property for a burying place.”

Now Ephron was sitting among the Hittites, and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the hearing of the Hittites, of all who went in at the gate of his city, “No, my lord, hear me: I give you the field, and I give you the cave that is in it. In the sight of the sons of my people I give it to you. Bury your dead.” Then Abraham bowed down before the people of the land. And he said to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land, “But if you will, hear me: I give the price of the field. Accept it from me, that I may bury my dead there.” Ephron answered Abraham, “My lord, listen to me: a piece of land worth four hundred shekels of silver, what is that between you and me? Bury your dead.” Abraham listened to Ephron, and Abraham weighed out for Ephron the silver that he had named in the hearing of the Hittites, four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weights current among the merchants.

This almost reads like Shakespeare. All this pomp and flourish are the diplomacy of that age. Abraham is highly respected by the Hittites and they make a big show of treating him with dignity and grace. He returns the favor, insisting on paying a fair price for the field.

Abraham’s righteousness is starting to show. He’s becoming a classy guy.

One of the scariest aspects of being a Christian is that we’re ambassadors for Christ. We represent the king of kings and the lord of lords. That means staying classy. Our behavior should always be worthy of the One we serve.

But, of course, it isn’t. Every day, the demerits just pile up. Yet somehow the pink slip never arrives. As laughably unacceptable as we are, we are where we’re supposed to be.

This is on-the-job training. Our growth is more important than our performance. We will “get better with age,” and that’s the plan.

This is the trademark of a great boss. Unfortunately, we tend to take this for granted. That’s missing the point. Our “luck” in having such a great God should be celebrated.

That’s the heart of worship.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Has the spiritual nature of a trial ever hit you suddenly—where it dawns on you that the trial is something more than just an annoying inconvenience?
2. Did you have a big “doubt eraser” in your life that you have let slip into the back of your memory?
3. Have you ever had a test where you had to let go of trusting the “normal” things and just trust God?
4. Have you ever really “hit the wall” in trying to be good? How did you fail?
5. Are you intimidated by your role as a representative of Christianity?