

The Faith of Abraham

“Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”

Genesis 22:14

It is a curious fact of human nature that the drama and tension we seek in a good story we resist in our own lives. We enjoy reading about people who risk their lives and experience great adventures, but personally, we prefer safety and security. We work at insulating our lives from the unexpected and avoid the risks and dangers we love to read about. Even those who seek a little excitement in life, such as skydiving or day-trading on the stock exchange or white-water rafting on the Colorado River, or coaching their daughter’s soccer team, end up trying to play it safe with God. It may be natural for us to want to stay in control and remain in our comfort zone, but the life of faith doesn’t work that way. The risks we prefer to dabble in are very different from the risks that come with living for Christ in the real world. To enter into the gospel story for ourselves we have to be willing to risk our lives, which means our identities, families, futures and freedoms, for the sake of Christ. Didn’t Jesus say, “Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it”(Mk 8:35)?

God’s Radical Call

If Abram had remained in Haran, his story would have come to a dead end. There was nothing about Abram and Sarai that distinguished them from anybody else. It would have been said simply that Abram lived so many years and then he died. His obituary would have listed a few facts and accomplishments and noted the cause of death. He and Sarai would have been remembered more for what they didn’t do than for what they did. They would have been defined more by their barrenness than by God’s blessing. Instead, Abram heard and responded by faith to God’s radical call. “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing” (Gen 12:1-2).

Life began for Abram at seventy-five! God called him out of his nothingness into a

life of faith. That is not to say that Abram was a failure in Haran. On the contrary, he left his homeland and family as a relatively wealthy man with plenty of possessions and servants. People long to have what Abram was called to leave, a familiar routine, a support system, financial security, and a predictable future. But God saw his home culture as nothing but a dead end. God called Abram out of his old culture, where he already had success, security and stability, into the life of salvation that God intended for him. If Abram had stayed behind and clung to the status quo, instead of becoming a sojourner, his story would have been of little interest to God.

The issue is not whether we find God's salvation history interesting, but whether our story fits into God's story. If we insist on staying behind, enjoying our little adventures and doing our own thing, the story will go on without us. The only way God's gospel story will mean anything to us, is when we step out in faith and trust God with our lives. Genesis 12 parallels Genesis 1. God created the cosmos and Abram out of nothing. The darkness is turned to light and the void is filled with order, rhythm, meaning and purpose, not only in the universe, but in Abram's life. What is especially exciting about God's call is its timing. It reaffirms that God has chosen to redeem us rather than abandon us. Not even the litany of depravity can drown out the melody of God's love and grace. Abram was called into a new life that was designed to impact everything. To use the apostle's words, "He is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Cor 5:17).

As it was with Abram and Sarai, so it should be with us. The radical call to faith comes to us in the words of Jesus, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden light" (Mt 11:28-30). To live by faith means that we are no longer striving to make a name for ourselves, but trusting in God to save us by his name. As the apostle proclaimed, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men and women, by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

God's radical call to faith stands in marked contrast to the efforts of our fallen human nature to make a name for ourselves. The Genesis story contrasts the Nephilim, the heroes of old and men of renown, as well as the Tower of Babel builders, with Abram and Sarai. Both the Nephilim and the people of Shinar tried to make a name for themselves, but God promised Abram, "I will make your name

great, and you will be a blessing” (Gen 12:2). When God makes our name great others are blessed, but when we strive to make our name great others are oppressed.

Only God can recreate us into the people of blessing we were meant to be. Abram’s story reveals that God’s radical call to faith and trust will be tested in every conceivable way, but God is faithful. God backs up his promises with his gracious provision. Abram’s life was defined by God’s call, God’s testing, and God’s provision. One of the first things that Abram did after setting out from Haran was to build an altar and worship the Lord God. We were meant to see the contrast between the tower of Babel, the epicenter of human self-sufficiency, and the altar at Bethel, the house of God in the wilderness. The tower and the altar depict two radically different ways of living. We can either strive to make a name for ourselves or rest on the promises of God. Abram heard the voice of God and he set out on his journey of faith, not knowing where it would lead but trusting in the One he was following.

God's Everlasting Covenant

The story of Abraham spans a hundred years from the time he was called by God to leave Haran until he was buried next to Sarah in the cave of Machpelah near Mamre. He was buried by Isaac and Ishmael near the great trees of Mamre where Abraham had eagerly extended eastern hospitality to three visitors. As was true in all of Abraham's encounters with the Lord, the radical call of faith was affirmed in unexpected, unusual ways. Each experience was a dramatic, earthy, powerful reminder of God's covenant with Abraham. It was as if God said to Abraham, "Never, ever, forget this!"

Following three episodes which tested Abraham's faith (12:10-14:24), the Lord God came to Abraham in a vision and said, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." Abram responded, "O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus? You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir" (15:1-3). For the first time the Lord spelled out what had been assumed all along, namely that the promise would be fulfilled by Abraham's own son. Then the Lord took him outside and said, "Look at the heavens and count the stars--if indeed you can count them. So will your offspring be" (15:5).

The importance of the cryptic line that follows cannot be overrated: "Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (15:6). What made Abraham acceptable, and thus exceptional, was the fact that he accepted God's Word. Abraham's life depended upon the Word of God. The apostle Paul built his case for justification by faith on the meaning of this line (Rom 4:3). Abraham "did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God....being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised" (4:20-21). Then Paul linked Abraham's faith to our faith: "The words `it was credited to him' were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness--for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead" (4:24; see Gal 3:6; James 2:23).

Contrary to popular opinion faith is not an illusive capacity that some people have and other people lack. There is nothing particularly religious about true faith. It is not something you can quantify. Faith is a relational word, like love and trust, describing in personal terms our response to the revelation of God. When someone says "I wish I had more faith," or "I wish I had your faith," they probably don't understand that faith doesn't involve believing in yourself, but in believing in God. It is not a question of our capacity, but of God's credibility. Abraham lived his life in dependence upon the Word of God. He simply believed God was telling him the truth.

Each time God reaffirmed his radical call to faith he did so in a dramatic and physical way. In Genesis 15 Abraham is told by the Lord to sacrifice five animals, a heifer, a goat and a ram, along with a dove and a young pigeon. Abraham obeyed. He did what he was told. He cut the animals in half and arranged the halves opposite each other. We can only imagine the sights and smells of this scene. We picture Abraham fending off the vultures as they swooped down on the bloody carcasses of the sacrificed animals. Abraham went from looking at the stars and contemplating God's blessing to a nightmare brought on by utter exhaustion. As "a thick and dreadful darkness came over him," the Lord informed Abraham of the bondage awaiting his descendants and their eventual return to the promised land. The vision was not vague. The Lord named names and set boundaries. And in the course of this vision, Abraham witnessed "a smoking fire pot with a blazing torch" pass between the halves. It symbolized God passing between the parts of the sacrifice and establishing his covenant with Abraham through a rite indigenous to the surrounding culture. To break one's word was to be cut in half. In other words, the consequence for violating the covenant was death (Joyce Baldwin, *The*

Message of Genesis 12-50, IVP, p.53).

When Abraham was ninety-nine years old, God confirmed his covenant again. The Lord God changed the childless patriarch's name from Abram to Abraham ("father of many") and his wife's name from Sarai to Sarah ("princess"). We are told that Abraham "fell face down," before God. He laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?" I believe we should understand that Abraham was laughing at himself, not God. There is a difference between disbelieving in God and letting yourself believe in the impossible possibility! You know the old adage "if it sounds too good to be true, it is." I wonder if Abraham is like the believer who truly accepts Christ as his Savior, but laughs to himself about the impossible possibility of heaven? We're not sure we should even let ourselves believe all that God has promised to us. As far as Abraham was concerned, he was eager for God to fulfill his promise through Ishmael. "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!" But God insists on the blessing that is truly beyond anything we can possibly do for ourselves. His answer to Abraham was clear, "Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac ("he laughs"). I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him" (17:19).

The sign of the covenant this time is not a sacrifice in the wilderness but a far more personal reminder. "Every male among you will be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you" (17:10-11). We find it embarrassingly intimate. Teenagers laugh at the thought of it, but God was serious. "My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant" (17:13-14). As far as wounds go, circumcision doesn't amount to much. From the beginning, however, it had symbolic value, a physical act standing for solidarity with God's people. It was a reminder in the flesh of a heartfelt relationship with God.

The apostle Paul clarified its meaning for us today when he wrote, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love" (Gal 5:6). Paul drew out the spiritual significance of the ancient rite and affirmed that it was superseded by baptism, "In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in

the power of God, who raised him from the dead" (Col 2:11-12). It is hard to imagine how God could have chosen a more personal and earthy reminder of his everlasting covenant than circumcision.

The pattern of sacrifice is repeated again when Abraham and Sarah are visited by three strangers near the great trees of Mamre. Mystery surrounds the identity of these strangers, but it became clear that the Lord was renewing the covenant for a third time. The Lord announced, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son" (18:10). Three parts of the story are meant to impress us, Abraham's eager hospitality, Sarah's laughter, and the Lord's disclosure to Abraham of his plans for Sodom and Gomorrah. Each one points to Abraham and Sarah's deepening relationship with God. As their faith grew so did their intimacy with God. They were brought into God's fellowship, communion and confidence.

We were meant to interpret the importance of these guests from Abraham's actions. First he hurried to meet them and nearly begged them to stay. Then he hurried back to Sarah. "Quick," he said, "bake some bread!" Then he ran to the herd and "selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it" (18:2-8). When he was finally finished scurrying around, preparing the meal, he stood near by, anxiously hovering to make sure everything was okay. Those who wait for God can identify with Abraham's eagerness. The longer they wait the more unassuming they become. True excitement for fellowship with God is born of humility.

The ensuing conversation centered on Sarah and the promise of a son was repeated. It was Sarah's turn to laugh to herself, for the same reasons Abraham had laughed previously. But this time the Lord asked, "Why did Sarah laugh? Is anything too hard for the Lord?" (18:13-14). Out of fear and embarrassment, Sarah lied and said, "I did not laugh." And the Lord said, "Yes, you did laugh." The exchange between the Lord and this couple had become intimate and personal. It reminds us of a dialogue between parent and child. The bond between them was growing.

The final scene of this visit deepened the partnership even further. The Lord decided to bring Abraham into his confidence as the guests were preparing to depart. We don't know who actually heard the recital of the covenant: "Then the Lord said, "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed

through him. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him" (18:17-19). What is clear is that the Lord thought it was important to bring Abraham into the dialogue. The Lord wanted to use his judgment against Sodom and Gomorrah to instruct Abraham in how to guide his children in the future. The Lord's preface makes it clear that it was the Lord who instructed Abraham and not Abraham who was guiding the Lord in mercy and sensitivity. If anything, the dialogue convinces the reader that God's mercy is not strained and that the wickedness of Sodom is great.

God's judgment against Sodom was not prompted by fear or vengeance but by a great outcry that rose up because of the city's grievous sin. Earlier we were told that "the men of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord" (13:13). Even so, God did not base his judgement on other people's outcry, but on his own assessment. "I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know" (18:21).

Abraham's intercession on behalf of the righteous and his probing of the character of God was not something God resisted, but invited (Baldwin, p.74). To his credit, Abraham never forgot that he was conversing with God. He was aware of the privilege and he took bold, yet humble, advantage of the opportunity. We must keep in mind, as well, that Abraham was pleading for the righteous, not for the wicked. Abraham pictures for us the meaning of the admonition found in Hebrews, "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Heb 4:16).

God's Ultimate Test

God's final and climatic reaffirmation of the covenant followed the ultimate test of Abraham's faith. Everything in the story of Abraham builds to this point and everything after is an epilogue. We can confidently say that all previous tests pale in comparison to this ultimate test. But may we not also say that these challenges were necessary to strengthen Abraham's faith? I believe Moriah provides the best vantage point for viewing all the tests and trials in Abraham's life. We remember that the Lord God and Abraham had a history together. Abraham had learned to trust in the Word of God and he was vitally aware of God's intense interest in his life and future. So that when the shattering Word of God hit like a hammer blow,

Abraham accepted it and obeyed. "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" (22:2).

The man who rose up the next morning and set out for Moriah was the same man who at the beginning of his faith journey went down to Egypt and conspired with Sarah to deceive Pharaoh into thinking that she was not his wife, but his sister (12:10-20). Abraham had a lot to learn about what it meant to trust in the Lord and lean not on his own understanding (Prov 3:5-6). Along the way Lot posed a number of challenges for Abraham, each one useful in strengthening and affirming Abraham's faith in the Lord. Abraham had the humility to yield to Lot rather than to greed, and then the courage to rescue Lot in spite of the odds against him. As a man of faith he was quick to respond to the blessing of God through Melchizedek and just as quick to refuse any support that would weaken his testimony. Success did not skew his convictions. His statement to the king of Sodom evidenced a deepening faith in the provision of God. "I have raised my hand to the Lord God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, and taken an oath that I will accept nothing belonging to you, not even a thread or the thong of a sandal, so that you will never be able to say, 'I made Abram rich'" (Gen 14:22-23).

The same man who took his *only son*, Isaac, three days into the wilderness to worship God, is the man who slept with his wife's Egyptian maidservant, and conceived Ishmael. Back then, Sarai and Abram could not wait any longer. They felt the need to act in spite of the promise, for the sake of the promise. They were sure the end would justify the means. "The Lord has kept me from having children," complained Sarai. "Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her" (16:2). In light of what God had promised, their fateful "I"-centered efforts were inexcusable and the world has suffered the painful consequences of their pride, jealousy, envy and insecurity. Had they not heard God's word? What part of the promise didn't they understand? We have already read, "Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (15:6). But now Abraham hears the impossible Word of God, "Take your son, your only son Isaac...", and responds immediately. He was willing to follow the Word of God to the grave and back again.

Only God's ultimate test could have eclipsed the birth of Isaac. As you read the story of Abraham, Isaac's birth bears less significance than his sacrifice (21:1-6). We know what's coming in the story; the drama on Moriah puts everything in

perspective. I wonder how Abraham would have compared his three-day journey with Isaac to his twenty-five-year wait for Isaac? The weight of Abraham's story and passion shifts from birth to sacrifice. He remembers Sarah's laughter when Isaac was born. How could he forget? She had announced to the world, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me" (21:6). But Abraham's joy now turned to sorrow—a sorrow he could permit no one to see.

When we hear this story we know more than Abraham knew; Abraham knew more than Isaac, and Isaac knew more than the servants. And God knows more than we do. All attempts to sit in judgment on God's Word should be forsaken. Abraham was aware of his ignorance, but Isaac and his servants were unaware of their ignorance. For Abraham to obey God's word he had to walk by faith. He had nothing else to go on. His faith was tested to the very limit. "He reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied.

"Do not lay a hand on the boy. Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son" (22:10-12). This is a surprising response. We do not know how Isaac and the servants interpreted this experience. Nothing was ever written. As far as Abraham was concerned his faith in God's provision was confirmed. The focus of the story is on God's response. His perspective alone mattered and his verdict on Abraham's actions was crucial. And the One who knew the most, who knows all, declared, "Now I know that you fear God..."

We must never assume that our actions are arbitrary to God or that we are following some predetermined course. From start to finish this was a real test. What God knew of Abraham was on the line and he passed with flying colors. There is a knowledge that not even God, who knows all, will claim before it is known by us and those who know us. The point was never to make Abraham prove to *himself and others* that he trusted more in the covenant-making God than in the covenant itself. The real issue from the start was whether he would prove this to God.

Abraham's life makes for a good story, one that is much easier to read about than experience firsthand. But if we're true children of Abraham we face similar tests and trials. Like our father in the Faith, we are told to deny ourselves, take our cross

daily and follow the Lord Jesus (Lk 23:23). We too, are tempted to solve our problems through deception and manipulation. We are faced with clear choices, as Abraham was with Lot, between asserting ourselves or denying ourselves. Like Abraham we grow impatient with the promise of God and we want to work it out for ourselves. Abraham and Sarah lived in the world by faith, just as we are called to live in the world; as resident aliens obeying the Word of God and trusting in God's promises.

God's Ultimate Provision

We cannot hear this story without picturing the Cross of Christ. Abraham demonstrated his faithfulness to God, but more than that he shows us the faithfulness of God. Abraham is a picture of God giving up his one and only Son for our salvation. We do well to meditate on the kindred spirit, the shared passion and the bond of love that the Lord God felt with and for Abraham. “Now I know that you fear God, *because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son*” (22:12).

The ultimate test revealed God's ultimate provision. And just as this test climaxed all the tests that had gone before, so this provision climaxed a history of God's blessing. Abraham looked up and saw a ram. “He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place ‘The Lord will provide.’” (22:13-14). Once again God renewed his covenant with Abraham, repeating what he had said years before, “...and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me” (22:18). God called Abraham out of nothingness into a life of fellowship with himself. Instead of a dead end, God gave him an inheritance—Isaac, the son of promise and Canaan, the promised land. God called Abraham out of barrenness and into His blessing. From the beginning the blessing was always greater than just for Abraham and Sarah. The promise extended to the nations, “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (12:3).

It was this great salvation blessing that gives special meaning to Ishmael. Although Ishmael was not the child of promise, and we may be inclined to ignore him, God kept bringing Ishmael back into the story. If God had not intervened Hagar would have been driven from Abraham even before Ishmael was born. But God commanded Hagar to return to Sarah. God told her to name her son, “Ishmael”, which means “God hears” (16:11).

At the age of thirteen, Ishmael was circumcised along with Abraham. A year later Isaac was born and the tensions grew between Hagar and Sarah, until Sarah exploded at Abraham, “Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that slave woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac” (21:10). Reluctantly, Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael away, but only after God assured him that he would bless them. The ensuing drama in the wilderness, where Ishmael was given up as dead, parallels Abraham’s journey in the wilderness to sacrifice Isaac on Moriah. In both situations, at the point of death, God intervened to save Abraham’s sons and bless them. “God heard the boy (Ishmael) crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, ‘What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation’” (21:17-18).

What is surprising is that Ishmael was never forgotten. He’s on the scene before Isaac and he is there at the end of Abraham’s life helping Isaac bury their father in a cave at Mamre (25:9). Isaac was the son of promise, but Ishmael was included in the blessing. Isaac fathers the line through whom God will send the messiah, but Ishmael is first in line for the salvation blessing that extends to the nations. This powerful gospel story may be more complex than we expected, but it is true. The tensions and complexities are not scripted and staged, but central to the real drama of human life. We must not forget Ishmael, because he is a reminder that the blessing of Abraham is offered to all people. The apostle Paul declared, “Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham’s offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. As it is written: ‘I have made you a father of many nations.’ He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were” (Rom 4:16-17).