

GENESIS Why The Beginning Matters

Study 17

Abraham and His Sons: The Final Test of Faith

Genesis 20-22

Part 1 of 3: God uses broken and failed people

Genesis 20:1-2; 11-13

Now Abraham moved on from there into the region of the Negev and lived between Kadesh and Shur. For a while he stayed in Gerar, and there Abraham said of his wife Sarah, "She is my sister." Then Abimelek king of Gerar sent for Sarah and took her.

....

Abraham replied, "I said to myself, 'There is surely no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.' Besides, she really is my sister, the daughter of my father though not of my mother; and she became my wife. And when God had me wander from my father's household, I said to her, 'This is how you can show your love to me: Everywhere we go, say of me, "He is my brother."'"

1) Fill in the blanks. According to the video lecture slide, fill in some of the lessons on God's grace in this story.

Abraham was an	imperfect	man
Driven by	fear	Despite all of God's promises
Abraham was not morally	superior	To Abimelech
The power of grace and	God's determination to achieve His purpose	No matter how imperfect Abraham was
Therefore		
Don't be haughty towards	others who don't believe or worship God.	You are only what you are by grace.
Don't think that you will ever	'Get over' sin	You will need to maintain your guard against sin
Don't think you have to be	better than anyone else to be of use to God.	God uses broken and failed people

Genesis 20:17-18

Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelek, his wife and his female slaves so they could have children again, for the Lord had kept all the women in Abimelek's household from conceiving because of Abraham's wife Sarah.

2) Reflection question. Abraham prayed for other people so they could have children even though he did not have the promised child yet. Rate from 0 to 10, how willing and comfortable you are to pray for someone else for something you personally do not have. (0= not comfortable at all, 10=perfectly comfortable)

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Genesis 21:1-3

Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him.

When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.

Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me." And she added, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."

2) Fill in the blanks. According to the video lecture slide, fill in the meaning behind Issac's name (laughter).

Verse	"God has brought me laughter,	and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me."
Type of feeling	Exaltation	Humiliation
Why so?	God's gracious delightful love brings joy	Sarah's unbelief is laughable
Applied to us	His delightful love	Our laughable weakness

Genesis 21:8-20

The child grew and was weaned, and on the day Isaac was weaned Abraham held a great feast. But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking, and she said to Abraham, "Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac."

The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son. But God said to him, "Do not be so distressed about the boy and your slave woman. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. I will make the son of the slave into a nation also, because he is your offspring."

Early the next morning Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He set them on her shoulders and then sent her off with the boy. She went on her way and wandered in the Desert of Beersheba.

When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes. Then she went off and sat down about a bowshot away, for she thought, "I cannot watch the boy die." And as she sat there, she began to sob.

God heard the boy 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."

Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink.

God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the desert and became an archer. While he was living in the Desert of Paran, his mother got a wife for him from Egypt.

2) a) Fill in the blanks. According to the video lecture slide, fill in the similarities and differences between Ishmael and Isaac's story.

Similarities	Differences	
	Ishmael	Issac
Sent out to wilderness	Sarah drives out Ishmael	God asks Abraham to sacrifice Isaac
Face certain death	Hagar passively watches Ishmael die	Abraham actively participates in the sacrifice of Isaac
Angel saves	Ishmael's peril occurs as a result of Abraham's disobedience	Isaac's peril occurs as a result of Abraham's obedience
Promises- future nations		

b) Fill in Blanks. According to the video lecture slide, what lessons can we learn from both Isaac's and Ishmael's stories?

Pain and suffering come to	all
Some because of	disobedience
Others because of	obedience

Part 2 of 3: The Ultimate Test is not Irrational Blind faith

Genesis 22:1-2

Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied.

Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you."

c) Reflection question. Knowing that there is no strict formula around the reason bad things happen to us, how do you personally think and handle bad things that happen to you?

Part 2 of 3: The Ultimate Test is not Irrational Blind faith

Deuteronomy 12:31

You must not worship the Lord your God in their way, because in worshiping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the Lord hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods.

3) a) Objective Question. Select all that apply. According to the video lecture, what is the reason God demanded the sacrifice of Isaac if he hates the sacrifice of children as mentioned in Deuteronomy 12:31?

A. It is a test of blind faith, no matter how outrageous the command, you do it if you are really faithful

B. Abraham should not have done it, he should have rejected it because God detests the sacrifice of children

C. The story should not be about blind faith because that would be out of its context, because if purely about obedience, then Isaac can be stabbed at home than in the mountains.

D. There is a context to the story. Historically in Jewish culture, firstborns represent the hope and dream for the family, firstborns are to forfeit to God (Exo 22:29-30, 13:11-16), and the

firstborn can be redeemed back (Num 18:15-16), therefore the calling of sacrificing of Isaac is God calling in the debt of sin every family owes to God.

E. It is a rational act of faith because Abraham went through a journey of faith with God in the earlier chapters and trusted God more and more, the highest act of trust is when Isaac is asked to be sacrifice.

F. God showed Abraham how He operates (Gen 18:17-19), Abraham knows of God's Justice and Mercy in Genesis 19, seeing how God remembered the promise about Lot his nephew, and he knows God would keep his promise about his son Isaac (Heb 11:17-18).

b) Objective Question. Select all that apply. According to the video lecture, what is Abraham's basis of rational faith for the act of the sacrifice of his son?

A. The culture of family is considered

B. There was a cultural significance tied to the firstborn son (primogeniture law)

C. Firstborn belongs to God because of sin

D. Abraham's journey of faith helped him

E. Abraham witnessed God's justice and mercy

F. God made a covenantal promise to Abraham and he know that God remembers it

c) Fill in the blanks. According to the video lecture, what is the verse that showed the following about Abraham's belief?

Abraham's belief	Verse
Abraham believed that his son will be safe	Genesis 22:5 He 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."
Abraham believed that God will provide	Genesis 22:7-8 Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?" "Yes, my son?" Abraham replied. "The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together.

d) Reflection question. There is a tension between obeying the command of God and depending on the promise of God. Out of 100 percent, how many percent do you think you are operating on “I can do this, I can do this” and how many of the rest do you think that “He can do this, He will provide” in your current journey of faith?

“I can do this, I can do this”	Percent (out of 100)	“He can do this, He will provide.”	Percent (out of 100)

Part 3 of 3: Tension between Faith, Works & Salvation

Genesis 22:15-18
 The angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, “I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.”

4) a) Fill in the blanks. Fill in the following on the covenant formula and formula by other religions according to the slide provided in the video lecture.

Covenant Formula	Election	Live Righteously	Covenantal Promises
Abraham	Genesis 12	Genesis 13-22	Still to come
Modern Christians	Conversion	Sanctification	Eternal life New heavens New Earth
1 Peter 1:3-5	In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,	who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.	and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you,

Every other religion’s formula	Live righteously	Salvation	Heaven
--------------------------------	------------------	-----------	--------

b) Fill in the blanks. Fill in the following on the differences between the way Apostle Paul and James use the word 'works'.

Author	Paul	James
Verse	Romans 3:28	James 2:21-24
The part referring to 'works'	"One is justified by faith apart from works of the law"	"Abraham justified by works"
Definition of 'work' in each of their own sentence	Work = what one does to earn salvation	Work= evidence of faith
Both are correct and do not contradict each other		

Take Away

Part 1 of 3: God uses broken and failed people
 Part 2 of 3: The Ultimate Test is not Irrational Blind faith
 Part 3 of 3: Tension between Faith, Works & Salvation

Case Study

Case 1 – Salvation

Caroline had been attending Alpha for a number of weeks and was coming to a point where she wanted to make the decision to turn to Christ.

However, she was struggling with many problems in her life. She was a drug addict hooked on cocaine and was also a guest relations officer at a local bar where she was expected to entertain guests with amongst others, sexual services. She was monitored by a pimp who wielded great control over her.

She no longer wanted to live like this but cannot possibly see herself making the decision to repent and turn away from this sort of life. She did not think she had the moral strength to do this. She wanted to but how was she to do this? She believed Jesus is God and wanted to give her life but she cannot possibly live up to His standards.

She ran away from the Alpha group and did not want to attend anymore. When her leader visited her, she told her that she was going to get her life all cleaned up and if this was done

then she can make a decision for Christ.

1) a) Discussion question. Has Caroline understood salvation properly? What is her misunderstanding?

Model Answer

She is thinking that salvation is by works, she has to be good enough to be saved and clean up her life before being saved.

b) Discussion question. If you were her Alpha group leader what would you say to her?

Model Answer

She has the process backward. She must turn or repent from her life of sin and turn over her life to Jesus. This involved a conviction in her mind that Jesus is the Son of God who died for her sins and is resurrected. The spiritual birth occurs when she turns from living her life under her own power and effort either in trying to be good or living in immorality. She acts on her conviction of who Jesus is and places her trust in Him.

She decides not to live in sin and makes plans to disengage from her current profession. The Lord will give her strength. It is a process that takes time.

c) Discussion question. How does the story of Abraham help her in the understanding of her situation?

Model Answer

When God appears to Abraham, he made a covenant with him and chose him out of all the inhabitants in Ur. He was chosen by grace, not by merit. He wasn't holier than the other people of his time and place. He was probably a worshipper of the Moon-god in his home country. God then prepares and works in Abraham's life step by step until he is able to live in a manner that pleases Him.

d) Discussion question. Can Caroline still keep her line of work and still be a Christian? After all it is the only thing she knows how to do and Jesus has paid for her sin, past, present and future. Why does she then have to give up this particular career whilst other Christians do not have to give up theirs?

Model Answer

No, her current line of work is immoral. It is a sin and once she makes a decision for Christ, at the same time it is a decision against sin. Turning your face towards Jesus is turning your back on sin.

There are many other works available that are morally neutral that can be an option. Other Christians may not have to give up particular careers, but they are to give up sinful practices such as bribing and lying that may be common in a particular career.

e) Discussion question. What concrete steps can you take to help her as a group?

Model Answer

She will need to be taken away from her current environment and away from her pimp who preys on her. She may need relocation to another part of the city or another town. Finances and accommodation and a new job will have to be found.

f) Discussion question. Suppose after 4 years of leaving the brothel, Caroline goes back to her old habits and takes up her old career again, against all the wishes of her church friends. Do you think she will be saved at the end of time? Consider that she did make a commitment to Christ and said the sinner's prayer.

Model Answer

These things are hard to answer but Jesus said that we will know the tree by its fruit. A godly life is evidence of a saved life. God is not going to be fooled by a hollow confession.

“Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, 10 nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. 11 Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God”

(1 Corinthians 6:9-11 NASB)

A life committed to Christ is a life on the road to salvation.

Case 2 – “All things to work together for good”

Andy and Tom are two students at Inti College studying Pharmacy. They have grown up together and are fast friends. Both attend the second Baptist Church in Subang Jaya. On their final exams, both boys came down with Dengue fever, and even though they had recovered a week beforehand they both failed their final exams. They both reacted badly to the setback.

They were comforted by their church leader who brought out the verse:

“And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn

among many brethren”
(Romans 8:28-29 NASB)

He told them you don't know the future but God will use this to His great plan and make all things good for them in the future. He said God had destined them to be victorious in all things in life. We are destined for glory. They will defeat life circumstances and be successful. But they must have faith otherwise it will be their fault.

They both believed the Word and obediently continued in their faith.

Andy continued his studies but failed the next year when he again fell ill and had meningitis just before the exams. He became bitter towards God, stopped attending church and gave up his course. He became a businessman. He started up a new software company and became very successful and Google bought out his company 6 years on. He came back to church after that and was praising God because if he had not failed he would not have started his company and would have been a pharmacist working impossible hours!!!

Tom on the other hand studied again very hard and passed his exam the following year. All the pharmacists who graduated in his year had great difficulties in getting good jobs because of the recession that year and he could not get any job in KL. He became a pharmacist and managed to get a job at a small town pharmacy at Grik in Perak. He was very confused and wondered if this was the victory God had promised him. How can he see any victory in this? He started to doubt. One day he was helping out a colleague by working his shift because she was sick and there was a robbery. He was shot by the robber and wound up disabled in a wheelchair for the rest of his life. He felt that this was God's punishment for his doubt.

They both met up for a class reunion and reflected on the verse in Romans.

Andy thought, *“How great God is. He really made all things work out for good for him.”* Now his faith was greatly strengthened.

Tom thought, *“Life sucks, and God's promises can't be trusted and I feel really bitter towards God”* It did not work out for good but for bad. He also felt guilty as well for doubting Him.

2) a) Discussion question. What does the story of the two sons of Abraham tell us about life for Christians and the issue of suffering?

Model Answer

At the very least we should learn here that there is no exemption from 'dangers, toils, and

snare' for anyone! There is a strong tendency to think that if we are obeying God and following his will, that life will go smoothly for us. That is a half-truth. The painful brokenness of Abraham's family is a consequence of his sin, and it would not have occurred if Abraham had been wiser and faithful. Perhaps we can say that this kind of suffering is more painful and destructive. But chapter 22 shows that God can call faithful and godly people to endure terrible suffering. In fact, there will be a kind of suffering that comes because we are obedient. Honesty, keeping promises, refusing revenge, generosity, and a host of other spiritual character traits can often lead to difficult situations that lying, breaking promises, and selfishness can avoid in the short run.

So an obedient life does not move us into a suffering-free life! It leads us into a life of greater usefulness, greater growth, and most of all greater joy — not into a life of greater comfort.

b) Discussion question. What was actually wrong with the church leaders' interpretation of the popular Roman verse?

Model Answer

The problem is the wrong interpretation of the Roman passage. Verse 28 says that God will work out all things for the good of all who love God

What does "all things work for good" mean? The answer is in verse 29 where there is a word "for" which means "because" ...we are predestined to be conformed to His image. Hence the "good" is measured as eternal capital...the good towards transforming us into the image of His Son. The common misinterpretation is that "good" means good circumstances. God does not promise us victory in terms of worldly circumstances. The victory is a spiritual victory over the devil and not worldly circumstances.

c) Discussion question. Given the right way of interpreting the Romans passage, how should Andy reflect on his good fortune and how should Tom reflect on his disability? How does this affect the way you live and interpret your own circumstances in life? Can you share with the group?

Model Answer

Andy should reflect back that it was amazing despite his disobedience and the fact that he left the church, God used the success in his company to bring him back to Himself. Andy did not deserve this, the success in the company was an act of grace. Andy should feel humbled.

Tom should reflect that by God's grace he is still alive, he could have been shot dead but God protected his life and God still has plans to use him to bring glory to His name in this horrible situation. Material good fortune is no measure of God's blessings because the Romans

passage says that God will do everything to bring us closer to the image of Jesus and in this case allowing the evil of the shooting to occur is just one of the ways in which this will be achieved. He will need to reflect on how coping with this disability will bring glory to Him.

d) Discussion question. Should Tom rightly feel guilty about his feelings of doubt and blame his paraplegia or disability on his own lack of faith? He doubted God and hence did not receive a good outcome.

Model Answer

Tom should not feel guilty about his feelings of doubt because they are not the cause of his paraplegia. Bad things happen to Christians as well as non-Christians. His church leader's misunderstanding of Roman's passage had caused inappropriate feelings of guilt. There is no perfect one-to-one correspondence in life such as thinking "if I am obedient then things will go my way". The most obedient person in the world was Jesus Christ and look where that got him: Betrayal, torture, and finally the cross. He will need to reflect on how coping with this disability will bring glory to Him.

Case 3 – Test of Faith

There was a pastor Rainier from the 3rd Baptist church of PJ who preached to his congregation and said that God had just spoken to him and his message was that He requires all of them to bring their most valued possessions to the church and they will all be sold off to pay for their church building which had run over budget by RM 2 million.

He used the example of Abraham and said that God tested him and asked him to give up his most valued possession Isaac and Abraham passed the test. It cost Abraham everything as all his future was tied up in Isaac. Material possessions are our idols and to prove our faithfulness to God, we need to go above and beyond and pay for the church building fund. We too needed to be tested like Abraham. Find the most valuable item in your entire house. It could be your Ferrari or your house, sell it for God. Give till it hurts and you give everything like Abraham gave everything.

Then God will say to you as He said to Abraham "*Now I know that you fear me*".

3) a) Discussion question. Is Pastor Rainier correct in asking his church to do this? If he is wrong, why is he wrong?

Model Answer

First of all, pastor Rainier is not God. He cannot ask or put a test forward to the people of the church because that was a specific request of God to Abraham in history and is not duplicated today.

How do we know that Pastor Rainier being a fallible human being actually heard the voice of God? Do we believe him just because he said he did? How do we know he is not doing this because he underbudgeted for the church building project and is now trying to salvage it due to his own ineptitude?

Some people will say Pastor Rainer is a good pastor and not a con man so he must be correct. Pastor Rainier can be a good pastor or even a good servant of God but he might not be a good administrator or even a prudent financier of the project. Just because he is a seemingly godly man does not make him right in every aspect of life. He is not Jesus Christ.

God's test for Abraham is a specific test in history, it is a one-off and never repeated and we live under the shadow of his promise and inherit its benefits. In the new testament, Paul gives us principles of giving and says:

"For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness" (2 Corinthians 8:13-14 ESV).

The principle of giving is that those who have given fulfilled a practical need and it is not done as the ultimate challenge or measure of our faith. The giving is done in such a way that the giver is not burdened. Paul does not insist we give up our house or everything so that we will be poor, but to give in a fair manner.

b) Discussion question. How do we apply the lesson of Abraham to our lives today?

Model Answer

"Make me your ultimate security, worth, and hope. Don't trust in anything but me for your vindication and joy. Don't rest your heart in anything more than me for your significance and acceptability." That means that now Isaac was everything to Abraham.

First of all, Isaac would certainly have been everything personally to Abraham. He would have been the emotional center of Abraham's life in a way that nothing in Genesis 12 was. Abraham was now very old and had been stripped down over the years, giving up everything to wait for Isaac. Now Isaac would have been Abraham's very soul and joy.

But there was even a greater test here. Second of all, he was everything *spiritual* to Abraham. Isaac was, essentially, the salvation God had promised. He was going to make Abraham a

great nation, which was (in the culture of the time) the greatest possible legacy and vindication. But he was also the promised one through whom God's blessing would come to the whole world. So Isaac is the salvation God had promised for so long. God is virtually saying, "Trust in me, though I am about to damn you." God seems to be contradicting his own word!

"One can only answer all the plaintive scruples about this narrative by saying that this concerns something much more frightful than child sacrifice. It has to do with a road out into utter God-forsakenness... for in this test God confronts Abraham with the question of whether he is willing to give up God's very gift of promise... God appears to want to remove the salvation begun by himself from history." – Gerhard Von Rad, Genesis

"By faith, Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac... He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, 'it is through Isaac that your seed will be called.'" Hebrews 11:17-18

He is to be our everything and for some of us, there will come a time when that ultimate sacrifice is called upon.

c) Reflection question. What is the ultimate thing in the world that is most precious to you and does that detract from your devotion to Him? Share.