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ULTIMATE SURRENDER

Genesis 22:1-24

By

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Genesis Lesson 45

Ultimate Surrender Genesis 22:1-24

One of the features on Garrison Keillor's "Prairie Home Companion" radio show is spoof advertisements. One that always makes me chuckle, although I haven't heard it recently, is "The Fearmonger's Shop," whose motto is, "Serving all your phobia needs since 1954."

Keillor is poking fun at the fact that we all have fears about life. Some fears are relatively trivial, although for the one doing the fearing, any fear seems substantial. One of the most common fears, believe it or not, even greater than the fear of death, is the fear of public speaking. More formidable are the fears we have from time to time about the loss of a job, the loss of our health, the loss of a loved one, or our own death.

My greatest fear is the fear of losing one of my children. We expect to lose our parents at some point in life. About half of us who are married will lose a mate in death. But we assume that our children will be around when we die. Our hopes are bound up with our children. And so the loss of a child hits us with greater force than perhaps any other loss.

Because of this, God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, is one of the most moving stories in the Bible. If we could approach it as if for the first time, it would hit us with shock, confusion, and perhaps even anger toward God. It would be hard enough if God took Isaac from Abraham; but it seems inconceivable that God would command Abraham to kill his own son! It seems opposed to God's loving nature. It seems like an impossible, unreasonable, and illogical demand. And Abraham's unquestioning response staggers me! How could he obey without a word of protest?

Abraham's obedient surrender is the high point of faith in all history. It stands like Mt. Everest above where most of us have been. I can only stand below and point up to its heights, aware of how my own faith falls far short. Next week I want to focus on

how this story reveals God's provision for us in the Lord Jesus Christ. But this week I want to look at what it teaches about surrender to God:

God blesses the one who obediently
surrenders everything to Him.

Like it or not, where God took Abraham is where He seeks to bring each of us.

1. God's goal is to bring us to the point of ultimate surrender to Him (22:1-2).

That sounds scary; but two things ease the fear:

A. Ultimate surrender involves a process.

Thankfully, it doesn't all happen the moment we trust Christ as Savior, or none of us would begin! When we trust Christ, we begin a lifelong process of surrendering to Him.

We read (22:1), "Now it came about after these things," that is, after the events of chapters 12 through 21. While this new trial of faith hit Abraham suddenly, it also was the culmination of years of God's dealings with him. Abraham's life was a process of God stripping him of all that he clung to, until finally he held to God alone. God's first command was for Abraham to leave his country, his relatives, and his father's house (12:1). Over the years, God stripped Abraham of his schemes and efforts to help bring about God's promises. This reached an apex when Abraham painfully sent away Hagar and Ishmael.

Perhaps Abraham thought that separating from Ishmael was the final test of his life. After that came the peaceful years in Beer-sheba. He rejoiced as young Isaac, the son of the promise, grew to manhood. The old man must have often looked fondly on the boy and given thanks to God. What a shock when God said suddenly, "I want you to offer Isaac as a burnt offering!" But it was the next step in the process of ultimate surrender to God.

At age 21, Jim Elliot, who was martyred in Ecuador seven years later, wrote, "One does not surrender a life in an instant. That which is life-long can only be surrendered in a lifetime." (*Shadow of the Almighty* [Zondervan], p. 91.) The Christian life is a process of yielding all of myself that I know to all of God that I know. As my

self-knowledge grows, I discover areas of my life that I thought were given over to the Lord; but they were not. At that point I must yield that new area to Him. And I will perceive new facets of God which require me to yield new areas of myself.

So God begins the process of pulling out from under us all the props we lean on, until He alone is left. It hurts. It may seem cruel of God. But a second fact eases the fear:

B. Ultimate surrender stems from God's love.

When the King James Bible says that God tempted Abraham, it is better rendered, God tested Abraham. God does not tempt us to do evil (James 1:13), but He does test our faith to prove it (James 1:3, 12). If we pass the test it reveals the quality of our faith. If we fail the test, it shows us where we need to trust Him more. But every test stems from the love of God, who knows that we will be the most blessed when we trust Him the most.

Yet we struggle with God's command to Abraham to kill his son. It seems unloving. In fact, God later forbids His people to imitate the heathen, who sacrificed their children to their idols. So how can God command Abraham to do this terrible thing He later forbids?

First, this was a one-time command, never given before or since. It was designed to illustrate in type what God Himself would do with His Son on the cross. So instead of being against God's love, it rather demonstrates His love in an unforgettable way which every parent can identify with. I never really knew how much my own father loved me until I became a dad. Then it hit me: My dad loved me as much as I love my child, and God loves me more than that! As Paul wrote, "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32).

One scholar, Bishop Warburton, suggested that Abraham had desired to know the *manner* in which all the families of the earth would be blessed in him. So God imposed this command chiefly with the design of teaching Abraham by action, not words, how the nations would be blessed through the sacrifice of God's own Son. By taking Abraham up to the very point of killing Isaac, the Lord allowed him to enter, as closely as any mortal could, into God's

experience in sacrificing His only Son (in George Bush, *Notes on Genesis* [Klock & Klock reprint], 2:2). So God's strange command actually reveals His own great love for us in sending His own Son, His only Son, to die for our sins. God was not asking Abraham to do anything He Himself would not do. The way God gives the command (22:2) shows that He is sympathetic to Abraham's feelings: "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, ..."

Another consideration is that God is the author and giver of life. Our children and our own lives do not belong to us, but to Him. To charge God with cruelty is to dare to assert that we have ultimate sovereignty over our lives.

"Yes," you say, "God has a right to take a life whenever He wants. But it is a different matter for Him to command a parent to take his own child's life!" True, but a final consideration may help us understand. In Abraham's culture, child sacrifice was a fairly common thing. Abraham had probably witnessed Canaanite fathers offering their firstborn on the pagan altars. God had not yet given any commandments against it, as He later would do. Gene Getz explains, "To Abraham, then, the experience was culturally related. If pagan deities who were nonexistent demanded such love, was it asking too much for the true God of heaven to require the same?" (*Abraham: Trials & Triumphs* [Regal Books], pp. 138-139).

And so while God will not ask us to kill our children, He does want us to offer those children back to Him. He takes us through the process of surrendering to Him everything that is precious to us, until we lean on Him alone. While it's painful, we can be assured that it always stems from His love, not from cruelty. How should we respond?

2. Ultimate surrender is seen in unflinching obedience to the difficult commands of God (22:3-10).

A. This was a most difficult command.

As I said, it would have seemed illogical and opposed to God's love. Think of Abraham's love for Isaac! I'm sure that, like any parent, Abraham would rather have sacrificed himself than his son. But even more, Isaac represented the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham. God had said that through Isaac He would

bless Abraham's descendants. If Isaac died, the hope for the promised Savior died; the hope for all the nations died!

So Abraham was faced with a seeming contradiction: He knew that God loved him and that Isaac was the promised heir. He also knew that God was now telling him to kill Isaac. Do you know how Abraham resolved this? Hebrews 11:19 tells us: "He considered that God is able to raise men even from the dead." So he went ahead in obedience to this incredibly difficult command!

We all come up against hard truths in Scripture where we think that God is being illogical or contradictory. What do you do at a time like that? A lot of people write God off and do what they want. Or they make up excuses: "You can't take the Bible literally." Or, "That command doesn't apply to us; it was just for that culture." So they skate around the difficult doctrines and commands of Scripture. But that's not surrender.

There are many things in the Bible that I wish were not there. Life would be easier. I could blend in better with our culture. But the real test of surrender isn't when I obey commands I like. If I say to my kids, "Eat your ice cream," it's not a good test of how well they obey me. The true test is when I ask them to do something difficult.

B. Unflinching obedience shows true surrender.

If Abraham debated this in his mind, the text doesn't record it. It shows him as simply obeying God. He obeyed promptly: he "rose early in the morning." He made the necessary preparations. He conveniently could have "forgotten" to take the wood or the fire, and then made up an excuse for his disobedience. But he didn't do that. He could have made excuses about Mount Moriah being too far away. Abraham had what Eugene Peterson has called, "a long obedience in the same direction." He followed through even though it wasn't convenient or easy.

How did he do that? There are several answers. As I've already mentioned, this was the next step in a lifelong process of yielding obediently to God. He had long since given himself over to follow the Lord; so at this point, there was no turning back. But two things stand out.

(1) *Abraham obeyed unflinchingly because he saw this as an act of worship* (22:5). His focus was not on his great sacrifice, but on his great God. He wasn't patting himself on the back for being so dedicated. He wasn't feeling sorry for himself for all he was giving up for the Lord. He wasn't self-focused at all. Rather, he was awed by the majesty and worthiness of God, realizing that no gift is too great to give Him. If we hesitate to obey the difficult commands of God, it may be that we have lost sight of God's greatness and have become focused on ourselves. Worship is at the heart of unflinching obedience.

(2) *Abraham obeyed unflinchingly because of his unwavering confidence in God.* He says, "I and the lad will go yonder; and we will worship and return to you" (22:5). He planned on coming back with Isaac! When Isaac sensed that something was wrong, he asked his father where was the lamb for the sacrifice (22:7). Abraham's reply shows both sensitivity toward Isaac and great confidence in the Lord: "God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son" (22:8). He knew that God could not be unfaithful. God had repeatedly given His word that Isaac was the son of the promise, so Abraham knew that if God required him to kill Isaac, then God would raise him from the dead.

Unflinching obedience to the difficult commands of God always stems from such confident faith. When you come to know God as your loving Heavenly Father, who cares for you more than any earthly father ever could, you can give Him *everything* in your life and know that He will not abuse you, in spite of how circumstances may appear.

God wants to bring each one of us to the place where we surrender everything to Him and trust Him totally with all that is precious to us. It's what Jesus meant when He said, "If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:26). When you've surrendered all to Him as Lord, then you'll obey Him unflinchingly, even when He asks you to do that which is most difficult.

You may be thinking, "Why would anyone want to go that far with the Lord? Isn't it better just to play it safe and give Him a little bit of my life, instead of the whole thing?" But remember Lot! That

was his approach, and his life was a tragedy. It's as Jesus said, "Whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it" (Matt. 16:25).

3. God blesses the one who surrenders all to Him (22:11-24).

As soon as Abraham revealed the intent of his heart, God called to him and prevented him from carrying out the sacrifice of Isaac. He showed him the ram caught in the bushes as the substitute. God then repeated His promised blessings and even intensified matters with an oath. Abraham joyfully returned to Beersheba with Isaac. The chapter concludes with news from Abraham's family back in Haran, mentioning Rebekah, who was God's provision of a wife for Isaac. The theme of this section is that God is the one who sees our needs and thus provides for them. He is called, "Jehovah Jireh," which means, "the Lord who sees" (in the sense of seeing to provide). The text shows three ways God blesses us:

A. God blesses us by providing the things which He demands of us.

God required sacrifice; He provided the sacrifice. To satisfy the demands of His holiness and justice, God demands the death of the sinner. But that is precisely what He has provided for every sinner in the death of His Son, who is our substitute. When Jesus told the Pharisees, "Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56), I think He was referring to this incident. Abraham was able to look ahead and see how God would provide salvation in the person of His Son.

B. God blesses us by providing assurance of His promises.

God here says, "By Myself I have sworn" (22:16) in affirming the promises which He has already given to Abraham. It is unusual for God to speak with an oath. The author of Hebrews picks this up, saying, "For when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, saying, 'I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply you'" (Heb. 6:13-14). Abraham's supreme act of obedience drew forth God's supreme assurance of blessing. If you lack assurance of God's promises to you, obey Him! He gives His greatest assurance to those who obey Him most fully.

C. God blesses us by providing for our future needs.

That's the point of the final verses giving the news of Abraham's family. No doubt Abraham had wondered where he would find a wife for Isaac, so that his son would not be absorbed into the Canaanite culture. God had already taken care of the matter in the person of Rebekah. When we obey God fully, we can trust that He is looking farther ahead than we are. He is already taking care, not only of our future needs, but also of the needs of our children!

Conclusion

One night, a family of five was crammed into a Volkswagen, inching along in a heavy rainstorm. Suddenly they saw a man and woman walking along the highway in the pouring rain. They pulled over and asked if they could help. They saw that the woman was carrying a baby. She said that they lived in a town several miles back, but the lightning had caused a short in the wiring of their house, starting a fire that had burned it to the ground. They had barely escaped with their lives and were walking to the next town seven miles away to stay with her sister until further provision could be made.

Feeling sorry for the family and realizing that there was no room in the VW, the man pulled out \$20, gave it to the woman, and drove off. A couple of miles down the road, he stopped the car and asked his family, "How much money do you have?" They pooled everything and came up with just under \$100. He drove back to where the couple was still walking. "Do you have the money I gave you?" he asked. Surprised, the woman said, "Yes, we do." "Then give it to me." Perplexed, she reached into her pocket, pulled out the \$20, and handed it to him. He combined it with the money he had and handed it all to her saying, "Here, our family would like you to have this."

This story illustrates how God often treats us. He gives us so many wonderful gifts, and then He comes to us and says, "I want them all back--every one of them." He does this so He can combine them with His unlimited resources and give them all to us (in *Disciples are Made, Not Born*, by Walter Hendrichsen [Victor Books], pp. 28-30).

When we see God's great love for us as seen in His not sparing His own Son, but giving Him up for us all, our response should be, as Isaac Watts put it, "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all." Give yourself and all that is precious to you to the Lord. He will bless you and give you great joy.

Discussion Questions

1. How would you answer the person who claimed that God told him to do something contrary to the Bible and based it on God's telling Abraham to sacrifice his son?
2. If you have an impression to do something "illogical," how can you know whether it is God prompting you, the devil tempting you, or just a crazy impression?
3. What would you say to a person who was afraid to yield himself to God for fear that God would require him to do something he didn't want to do (like go to the mission field)?
4. What is the most difficult area you've had to surrender to God?

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