

Prayers

Opening prayer

Jesus, wonderful and powerful Lord; calm my spirit today as I place my trust in You. My past gives me firm evidence of Your faithful love and care, my daily life offers constant proof of Your wise correction and guidance, and I therefore have every confidence that You will secure my future. Stay close to me, Lord Jesus, that I may trust You every moment, and accept Your direction in all things. Praise Your name, Lord Jesus; **ALLELUIA!**

Prayer Suggestions

General theme for the week: HEALING

1. For yourself

Pray about any short term conditions you tend to catch, colds or flu, or reactions such as hay fever. God has made the body to heal itself from a great deal, so give Him thanks for this

2. For your friends and family

Pray that your friends will stay healthy and overcome illness.

3. For the church and its work

Pray for the church's medical work through medical missionaries, hospitals and other charitable work.

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Pray for those who are responsible for your country's policy of health care. Pray that they will always consider the needs of the poorest

Meditation

Gracious Lord and holy God, You lift us up:

When we need Your help,
You are ready to assist us,
And respond to our needs immediately.

Jesus Christ our Saviour, You hold us close:

When we need Your touch,
You reach out in compassion,
And come amongst us to heal and to save.

Holy Spirit, comforter, You breathe in us new life:

When we need Your strength,
You are ready to help us,
And restore us by Your might and power.

Father, Son and Holy Spirit, You always care for us:

Before we even know our need,
You are ready and waiting,
And You have an answer to satisfy our souls.

Alleluia!

Bible Study

Bible passage – Genesis 22: 1-14

¹ Later, after all that had happened, God tested Abraham. He said to him,

‘Abraham!’

and he replied,

‘Here I am.’

² He said,

‘Now take your son, yes, your only son Isaac, the one whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. There, you are to offer him as a whole burnt sacrifice on one of the mountains I show you.’

³ Early in the morning, Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took two of his servants with him, and his son Isaac. When he had cut the wood for the burnt offering, he set off for the place that God had spoken to him about.

⁴ Then on the third day, Abraham looked up and saw the place ahead of them. ⁵ He said to his servants,

‘Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there and offer worship. Then we will come back to you.’

⁶ Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and loaded it onto his son Isaac, and he carried the fire and the knife himself. As the two of them walked on together, ⁷ Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham,

‘Father!’

And he replied,

‘Here I am, my son.’

He said,

‘The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a whole burnt sacrifice?’

⁸ Abraham said,

‘My son, God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering.’

And the two of them walked on together.

⁹ When they reached the place God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood around it. Then he bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Abraham then reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said,

‘Abraham, Abraham!’

And he said,

‘Here I am.’

¹² He said,

‘Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.’

¹³ Then Abraham looked up and there, caught in a thicket by its horns, he saw a ram. Abraham went over and took the ram. And he offered it up as a whole burnt sacrifice instead of his son. ¹⁴ So Abraham called that place ‘The LORD will provide’; as people say to this day, ‘On the mountain of the LORD, it will be provided.’

Review

This extraordinary story has profoundly affected Christian faith throughout the centuries. Here is Abraham’s ultimate test for which we have been awaiting a long time, and it is one of the Bible’s most poignant stories. It describes what some people call ‘blind faith’, but that may be too naive. It is a story involving a father and a son, and an impossible situation of life and death within a culture of sacrificial worship which is quite foreign

to us, and the only thing which makes sense of the story is a profound obedience to God in all circumstances on the part of Abraham.

The idea that a father might take a son to sacrifice him is entirely foreign to us, and it is chilling to be reminded that Abraham lived at a time when people sacrificed all manner of animals to the gods. In some societies, even children were sacrificed; something which scripture regards as abominable (Lev 20:2ff; 2 Kings 23:10; Ez 20:31). However, the closer we read this text, the more we discover that Abraham acted with a faith that was completely confident in God's resolution to what appears to be an impossible situation and demand (22:5). The Bible celebrates such faith as lying at the heart of Abraham's relationship with God; for Isaac, the child of promise who was born to Abraham and Sarah in their old age after years of trial and testing, had to be offered wholly to the Lord. If Abraham could let his son go into God's hands then he would dramatically receive him back again as the true evidence and testimony of God's love.

God told Abraham to sacrifice his son (22:2), a command that must have seemed ridiculously impossible. The fact that other people did things like this in those days would have only made the request appear stranger to Abraham, whose faith in the Lord had grown over many years and was utterly different from other forms of religion practiced in those days; yet Abraham was obedient. The story gradually builds and is told with craft and care, moving towards its climax as father and son walked together exchanging intimate conversation (22:6-8), Isaac becomes confused about what was happening, and Abraham protects his son from the inner feelings which must have churned in his soul. Suddenly, and with great speed, the story concludes: Abraham took Isaac, placed him on the altar as for sacrifice, went to kill him and then heard the voice of God telling him to stop! In a moment, Abraham's attention was called to a lamb caught in a thicket which was substituted as a sacrifice for Isaac.

The explanation provided is this 'The Lord will provide' (22:14). This, indeed, is true faith for all life; the Lord will provide. However, it was many centuries before faith was accepted as the key to our relationship with God. The prophet Micah reflects on this theme (Micah 6:6,7)

"With what shall I come before the LORD, and worship God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings ...? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams ...? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul "

These words reflect the prophet's own uncertainty that he might have the true quality of the faith of Abraham, as any of us may feel after reading this text. However, God Himself 'provided a substitute' sacrifice so that our worship of God is now acceptable to him, and that sacrifice is Jesus Christ. If Abraham's faith was sufficient for God to have a relationship with him and to use him, then so is faith in Jesus Christ who was sacrificed and died instead of us at Calvary. It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of this text for our understanding of faith today.

Going Deeper

How could a loving God require anyone to sacrifice a child? How could Abraham go along with this and not object? Surely, there had to be other ways of proving faith? It is right for us to ask such questions, but they all fall away if we realise that the story tells us only those things which serve to illustrate Abraham's faith in God. A thousand things may well have happened, but this story retains its absolute focus on Abraham and his trust in God.

The Test

From the outset, Abraham was quickly and immediately responsive to God, and scripture tells us that what happened to him was a test (22:1). This, at least, softens the blow of the awful three-fold command which comes next 'take ... go ... sacrifice ...' At no point before this had the Lord directly commanded Abraham to offer him any kind of worship, though Abraham had built altars and worshipped God as a matter of course in his travels (12:8, 13:18 etc.) Now, God required Abraham to worship Him, and demanded the sacrifice not of an animal, but his son Isaac.

In telling Abraham to take his son, the Lord's words were forceful and direct. He told Abraham to sacrifice; 'your son ... your only son ... the one whom you love'. Again, a threefold emphasis makes it absolutely clear what was required. Before Ishmael left Abraham's household, Abraham had appeared to love him (21:11), but now, Abraham's love did indeed coincide with what God required of him, and he had both learned and accepted that Isaac was the 'child of Covenant'. Everything God commanded of Abraham would have seemed to him to be utterly incongruous; why should he take the son born at such cost and sacrifice him as an animal, and 'hand him over' to God in sacrificial death?

Abraham was commanded to go to the land of 'Moriah'. Abraham clearly knew the general region to which he should go, but it seems that the Lord kept the exact place a secret. The other mention of Moriah in the Old Testament is in 2 Chron 3:1, where it is identified as the place where Solomon built the Temple (many

hundreds of years later). Solomon's father David had purchased the site towards the end of his reign after being directed there by an angel of the Lord (1 Kings 24:16ff). Abraham had no idea that what he was doing was of such significance in God's eyes that it would be commemorated in the building of a great Temple, and would be prophetic of the worship of later generations born to Isaac. Neither did he know that what happened to him and Isaac would signify the death and resurrection of God's only Son, Jesus Christ, and help us to understand something of the redeeming love of God for all people through His own Son.

Abraham gathered what was necessary for the journey and the sacrifice (22:3f.), including two servants to accompany himself and Isaac. It seems strange that wood was taken for the sacrificial offering, but they were travelling into unknown regions, and could not be certain as to what they would find. They travelled until 'the third day' (22:4); an expression which immediately catches the interest of a Christian, for we already know that there are strong connections between this story and the work of Jesus on the Cross. The Bible often uses this expression ('three days'), however, for a period of time of great importance (Ex 3:18, Num 10:33, Hosea 6:2 etc.), and three days was a long time for Abraham to journey, knowing the gravity of what he had been called to do. The phrase tells us that Abraham had the courage and the faith to persist in God's call.

What happened on the Mountain

When the four of them reached the mountain, the story becomes increasingly tense. Abraham instructed his two servants to stay where they were (22:5), but his words 'we will come back to you' have been the subject of interest for centuries. Abraham was at this point, living out something of a lie before his servants and his son; it was a terrible place for Abraham to be. He had not told his servants that he had been commanded by God to slaughter his son Isaac, and how could he say anything lest he give away what God had commanded him to do; something which his servants would probably have refused to take part in. In this light 'we will come back to you' could sound like pure deception on Abraham's part. However, many people see in these words an expression of supreme faith, as if he was expressing the purest confidence that God would resolve the awful situation in which he had been placed. Surely, Abraham must have thought, God could not possibly demand the slaughter of Isaac, and surely He would do something else? This is true, but Abraham's faith was not to be tested by his thoughts, words or what he said to the servants, but by his deeds. We must not treat the scene too lightly, as if no-one really had to be too worried, for God would sort everything out. The tension in the story line reflects complete uncertainty about what would happen on the one hand, and Abraham's utter obedience and faith on the other.

From verse 6, Abraham and Isaac walked alone to the place of sacrifice; and the phrase 'the two of them walked on together' occurs twice (22:6 and 22:8). It encloses a brief snapshot of the tense situation as Isaac spoke up at last to ask his father about the sacrifice. He knew enough about the Lord and about worship to know that they were preparing for a sacrifice. 'Where is the lamb ...?' he asked. 'My son, God Himself will provide ...' was his father's answer, full of the paradox of the whole situation and expressing perhaps real faith, incredulity, and even hope. Each of us has been in situations where words are inadequate and explanations seem trite.

With the place of sacrifice prepared, it is scarcely possible for us to envisage the scene as Abraham suddenly took his son and raised his knife to sacrifice him. This moment was the supreme test of faith; not the words he had spoken previously or anything else that had gone before. Here was the evidence of that faith in action, for Abraham was willing to complete the sacrifice. Scripture describes dramatically how Abraham reached out his hand for the knife, but as the Lord saw this, He called out to Abraham to save Isaac! In that split second, Abraham's faith was both demonstrated by his actions, but also shown by his ability to hear the Lord in the midst of a moment of supreme emotion (22:10,11).

Following the Lord's instructions, Abraham took a ram caught in the bushes nearby and sacrificed it for worship to the Lord. This was the sacrifice that Isaac had expected, and that Abraham had probably hoped for, and although sacrificial worship is far removed from our own experience, it would have been intensely meaningful after all that had taken place. We can barely imagine the feelings of those involved. What must Isaac have thought about what had happened; he had been saved! What must Abraham have thought about it all, foolish before the son against whom he had raised his knife, or relieved at the Lord's provision? As so often in scripture, we are not told about human emotions. We are only told that things changed as a consequence of what happened, and this was marked by the naming of the place 'The Lord will provide' (22:14), and tomorrow we will learn more about the significance of the whole event.

Discipleship

Application

In this unique and powerful scripture. Faith is demonstrated not merely in words or in obedience, but in the very heart and will of Abraham. He was prepared to follow the Lord's call whatever it demanded of him, and he was also mature enough not to lose control of himself, so that he was in a position to hear the Lord's command at the crucial moment in order to save Isaac. Abraham therefore showed the kind of mature faith upon which God wanted to build his relationship with those He had created, and who, since the fall of Adam, had gone astray. We can learn from Abraham's faith, and throughout the history of the Church, God's people have found that when they 'lay all on the altar' before God, as Abraham did, then the Lord is able to take them and use them for His work. We should not forget however, that the journey by which Abraham reached this point was long and hard, and frequently painful.

This story is prophetic, and speaks not just of human responses to God by faith, but of the way God chose to bring about our salvation through His own Son Jesus. The early church quickly saw within this scripture a parable of what had happened to Jesus. They identified with Isaac, for by faith, they were 'sons of Abraham', as we are to this day. They regarded Jesus as the lamb (ram) caught in the thicket, who was sacrificed before God instead of themselves (represented in Isaac). The whole picture seemed to them to go together with the picture of the innocent lamb that was slain used by the Prophet Isaiah to explain the work of God in his most famous prophecy (Isaiah 53). When put together, all this spoke to God's people about the Messiah as a 'suffering servant', and the 'Lamb of God' (John 1:29; Rev 22:1ff) who had taken away the sins of the world through His death on the Cross.

Today, the application of this passage of scripture is twofold, firstly, it speaks of supreme obedience and faith which is the only proper response of humanity to God. Secondly, it speaks poignantly about Jesus' death for us in our place on the Cross of wood. The story of Abraham and Isaac is prophetic of both.

Questions for groups

1. What emotions does this great text arouse in you? What do you feel about God's request of Abraham to sacrifice his son?
2. Discuss with your group the spiritual significance of the sacrifice of the lamb.
3. How does this passage of scripture help us to make sense of Abraham's life? In what ways does it sum up all that has gone before.

Discipleship challenges

- *Write a list of the lessons about faith you have learned in the last year, for example, for this will tell you whether you are growing in faith, or standing still!*
- *Plan a fast for a day, and use the time made available to you to pray about placing what is most dear to you 'on the altar' before God, so that He can receive it, and give it back to us according to His will.*

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, I rejoice in the love You continue to show me. Help me remember the cost of that love; Your life, Your ministry, Your death, and Your resurrection. Give me the grace to respond by offering all I have in Your service, and being content to follow You all my life. AMEN
