

DHW
LESSON 16

THE BOOK OF GENESIS

CHAPTER 22 & 23

INTRODUCTION

We have come to the climatic point of Abraham's faith. Almost a whole chapter is given to describe how God tested his faith. We see that Abraham's faith had matured further.

Our faith in Christ Jesus needs to be likewise strengthened and perfected. There are times in our lives when we have to make a choice between obeying God or keeping something/someone that we love. There are times when obeying God seems irrational. How do we respond? This study provides some spiritual guidelines for us.

Abraham also demonstrated how we should conduct ourselves during the loss of a loved one. The details provide some valuable and practical insights.

Genesis 22 & 23 can be divided into the following parts:

1. The testing of Abraham's faith (22:1-19);
2. Abraham told of Nahor's children (22:20-24);
3. Abraham mourned the death of Sarah (23:1-2);
4. Abraham procured a piece of burial ground (23:3-16).

The Testing of Our Faith

In the opening verse, God sought to test Abraham's faith. The word *tempt* should be understood as testing although it is usually associated with enticing someone to evil or sin. God does not tempt man to sin.¹ God tested Abraham in order to determine the extent of his faith in Him.² Of course, Abraham did not know that God intended to test his faith. Otherwise the test would be of no value. The effectiveness of the test had to be both sudden and surprising.³

Abraham had obeyed God in sending Hagar and Ishmael away although it grieved him to do so (21:12) – we may argue that it was because he still had Isaac. But on this occasion, we see the ultimate test. Isaac was the only child left to Abraham and he loved him dearly. Note how God described Isaac to Abraham: *Take thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest ... and offer him ... for a burnt offering ...* (v. 2). The description is threefold. Each description increases with intensity: first, your son; next, your only son; and then whom you love. Note also that each reference to "son" is preceded by the demonstrative pronoun. This added a degree of solemnity to the divine order.

Surely Abraham never imagined that God would ask him to do such a thing. But the commandment was clear. From the human point of view, God seemed

¹ James 1:13 Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man:

² Willem A. VanGemeren, Gen. Ed., The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997, 5 vols.) volume 3, p.111, s.v. "nsh," by Terry L. Brensinger.

³ Ross, 396.

completely inconsistent with His character. This injunction would destroy His plan and purpose.

Abraham understood what God wanted him to do. He did not raise any question or protest. Instead, he *rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering* (v.3). On the third day of his journey, he saw the place where God had commanded him to go. He told the two young assistants to stay with the ass, while he and Isaac would proceed to worship on the mount and then return to them (v.5). Abraham referred to Isaac as “the lad” to his servants. Isaac was probably in his teens.⁴ This can be surmised from the fact that when Abraham bound his son, he offered no resistance. God may call us to give up a person or a thing. Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself once declared that if we are not prepared to forsake our family, leave all, and follow Him, we are not worthy to be His disciples.⁵ If we want to be a true worshipper and follower of Jesus Christ then we must be willing to sacrifice our treasures just like Abraham. Are we prepared to obey Him in all things? We must demonstrate our trust, faith and

obedience in our lives. Let us be living testimonies.

Trusting God to Provide

Abraham gave the wood to Isaac to carry. He carried the fire and took a knife. The conversation between father and son was touching and heartbreaking. Isaac asked the natural question: *My father ... Behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?* (v.7). It must have pained Abraham to answer. He said, *My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering* (v.8). Little did Abraham know how true his words were.

Having reached the place, Abraham proceeded to bind Isaac. Isaac did not protest or resist. He trusted his father completely. His submissive obedience to his father's purpose is a faint picture of the perfect obedience of Jesus who humbled Himself and took away the sins of the world on the cross. Abraham lifted the knife and as he was about to strike Isaac, the Angel of the LORD stopped him! Although God would not allow Abraham to literally sacrifice the human life of his son upon the altar, both Abraham and Isaac in spirit and intention went through the sacrifice. Therefore God's call at the last minute and His provision of a ram was, as it were, an illustration of resurrection of Isaac from the dead.

God provided a ram for the burnt offering. Abraham named the place *Jehovah-jireh*⁶ – today, the name is commonly understood as “*The LORD will provide.*”

⁴ Hamilton, vol.2, p. 100. Jewish tradition put Isaac's age at 37. They derived this by subtracting the age when Sarah gave birth to Isaac (90) from the age she died (127). Sarah died suddenly probably from a heart attack when she learned that Abraham offered Isaac as a burnt offering. It is not mentioned that Abraham told Sarah about the offering of Isaac. It would be natural for him to keep the purpose of his trip a secret.

⁵ Luke 14:26 If any *man* come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. 27 And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple.

⁶ VanGemeren, s.v. *rah*, by Jackie A. Naudie (vol.3, p.1009). The passive, to be provided, is expressed by the niph'al. The place of testing was called, “On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided.”

Being Assured of God's Blessing

After Abraham passed the divine test, the Angel of the Lord called out of heaven and restated the promised blessings (vv.17-18). The LORD swore by His own name His covenant promises to Abraham. This is the first instance where God swore by His name. The purpose is clear: God was laying down the heaviest emphasis on His promised blessings to Abraham. After this, Abraham and all those who were with him returned to Beersheba.

What are the lessons for us? There is the principle of offering and giving to God. All that we have belong to God. What have we given to God in return? Our time? Our service? Our career? Our heart? For where our treasure is, there will be our heart also. God requires the very best from us, even our firstborn⁷. By offering our treasures, we show our love, our faith, and submission to His will. God who sees our heart will provide for all our needs. His dealings with Abraham show that if we are willing to offer Him our all, He will not only provide us with the means to do so but He will pour more blessings upon us.

Are we willing to return to Him the things, which He has given to us so liberally? God challenged us through the prophet Malachi, *prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it* (3:10). The question is whether we are willing to offer Him

⁷ Exodus 22:29 Thou shalt not delay to offer the first of thy ripe fruits, and of thy liquors: the firstborn of thy sons shalt thou give unto me.

what is dearest to us as an expression of our love and acknowledgment of who He is!

Nahor

Nahor was Abraham's brother (11:26). News came to Abraham that Nahor's wife, Milcah, bore eight sons. The youngest son, Bethuel, had a daughter called Rebekah. Nahor also had a concubine by the name of Reumah, who bore him Tebah, Gaham, Thahash, and Maachah. This section serves to introduce Chapter 24, which features the search for a wife for Isaac from among Abraham's kindred.

Mourning Our Dead

Sarah was called home at the age of 127 years. At her death, Abraham and Isaac were 137 and 37 years old respectively. Abraham mourned and wept for Sarah.

The rest of the chapter reports the arrangements for Sarah's funeral and burial. Abraham negotiated with the Hittites to purchase a piece of land. The Hittites owned the land having migrated and settled there. Abraham was *a stranger and a sojourner*. However, the Hittite was right in saying that Abraham was *a mighty prince*. Abraham had fought victoriously against the five kings and established his authority over the land. The local chiefs were indebted to him for saving them. Abraham's reputation had spread far and wide, from Dan in the north to Beersheba. Moreover, his wealth, the size of his household and his honesty made him a desirable ally. It was therefore no surprise

that the Hittites were more than willing to offer him the best gravesites of his choice.⁸

The gravesite that Abraham wanted was not in the land of the Hittites⁹. There was a cave in Machpelah in Canaan. It belonged to Ephron. Abraham was prepared to pay the full price for the grave, which was near the city of Hebron. Ephron offered to give it to Abraham for free, but Abraham insisted on paying for it. Ephron managed to subtly mention that the land was worth *four hundred shekels*. He was not sincere about giving Abraham the land for free. The fact, that he quoted the price of the land and then added that the sum was a small matter, demonstrated hypocrisy and greed. The price for the land was exorbitant by the standards at that time, and Ephron made a great profit. Abraham did not bargain with him. It would not be appropriate on such a solemn occasion. He presented a picture of dignity and respect in his dealings with the Hittites.

Abraham gave Sarah an honoured burial. Although the body is just a corpse (as some might call it), it was nevertheless once the body of a loved one. We should therefore give it a proper and fit burial.

Sarah did not see the promise of the covenant fulfilled. She did not see Isaac get married and have children. The theological thrust is that sometimes God's

people do not get to see the fulfilment of God's promises. But that does not mean that God has forgotten His promises. He will fulfil them in His time.

The theme of the chapter is the death of one who had been dearly loved. There were recurrences of the words "bury my dead" or "bury thy dead." It was the practice of God's people to bury their dead, instead of cremating them. The funeral and burial should be solemn and dignified.

Death is inevitable. There is no escape from it, except when Rapture happens. All believers who are still alive will be snatched up to meet the Lord in the air and their bodies will be transformed in the twinkling of an eye. They will not taste death¹⁰. That would be glorious indeed!

PRACTICAL VALUE

Abraham's conduct, as recorded in these two chapters in Genesis is extraordinary. His acceptance of God's Word through faithful and unwavering obedience is an example we can all draw from. Despite all the trials and patient waiting for God to fulfil His promise in providing Isaac, the clear instruction to Abraham, as a test of his obedience, was one which would be difficult to obey. Despite the obvious human struggle, there was no record of Abraham delaying or trying to negotiate with God to vary the instruction. This is faith.

⁸ Ibid., 94

⁹ Paul Wright, ed., *Shepherd's Notes: Genesis*: "The Hittites were a large and influential group in the second millennium B.C. Their homeland was on the Anatolian plateau (modern central Turkey). Ancient records note individual Hittites living various lands along the eastern Mediterranean shoreline. Archaeologists have uncovered evidence of Hittite cultural influence in Canaan. Hebron, an important city in the hill country of southern Canaan, was evidently a Hittite enclave" (p.59).

¹⁰ 1 Thessalonians 4:16 For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: 17 Then we which are alive *and* remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.

It is worthwhile for us to take a moment to reflect on Abraham's actions in this regard. As believers, our faith will be tested. Abraham has set the example for us to follow. Are we prepared to follow his example?

The blessing of obedience was for Abraham to take. Through his faithful obedience, Abraham's actions have been recorded in God's Word, for all to read and learn; Isaac gets a lesson to appreciate how to be faithful to the living God; and God's promise is repeated once more to further encourage and strengthen Abraham's trust in God.

It is curious to note that despite leaving his homeland, Abraham stays in touch with the events of his extended family. It sets an example for us to not disregard our extended families. They may not be on the same faith journey as us, but we should never forget or lose touch. We may lose the blessing of being used by God to touch and reach out to them, should we neglect to keep in contact.

Finally, with the passing of Sarah, it was touching to see how Abraham made the efforts he did to bury his wife. Despite not being a local, Abraham made the effort to purchase a land to bury Sarah, and did not quibble about the costs of the arrangements, but did what was needed to provide a dignified burial.

Again, this sets the example for us. As spiritual children of Abraham, we must pay attention to the manner by which Abraham made the arrangements and proceeded to bury his wife. We must understand that death does not change the need for us to treat our God-given bodies with respect and due honour.

Let us take the time to reflect on the different faith lessons in these chapters and may we consider how we can better live our lives to please God as Abraham had.

AMEN