

Tempered By Trials

Sermon # 1

Abraham: The Supreme Sacrifice

As we noted in this morning's message who has not asked the question, *Why? Why me? Why my family? Why is this happening to us?* These are familiar questions which are asked by Christians and non-Christians alike. No one is immune to suffering and adversity. Job tells us, "Man is born unto trouble as the sparks fly upward" (Job 5:7). Some suffer for what they have done; others suffer because of what people do to them. Many suffer because they are victims of circumstances which they cannot control.

Pain is distressing. There can be nights of agony when God seems so unfair and it seems that there is no possible help or answer. Temporary relief may seem adequate, but the real solution to suffering is not to isolate it in an attempt to do away with it, nor even to grit our teeth and endure it. The solution, rather, is to condition our attitudes so that we learn to triumph in and through suffering. When the Apostle Paul sought relief from his "thorn in the flesh," God did not take it away, but reassured him with: "My grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9, KJV). In another encouragement to the Corinthians, he wrote, "And God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that ye, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work" (2 Corinthians 9:8, KJV).

Except for physical pain, handling suffering seems to be a question of attitude: *"What am I going to do in the face of suffering in order to learn from it and use it for my advantage as far as God's eternal purposes are concerned?"*

Billy Graham comments: "Nowhere does the Bible teach that Christians are exempt from the tribulations and natural disasters that come upon the world. Scripture does teach that the Christian can face tribulation, crisis, calamity, and personal suffering with a supernatural power that is not available to the person outside of Christ."

Some of the most pathetic people in the world are those who, in the midst of adversity, indulge themselves by wallowing in self-pity and bitterness, all the while taking a sort of delight in blaming God for their problems.

If you know anything about the Biblical character named Job you know he lost everything. He lost his children, he lost his home, his business, his friend's loyalty, his wife's confidence, and then finally he lost his health. He came to the conclusion at the end of it all that he wished that he had never been born,

If anybody knew about trouble, Job knew about it. Yet he developed such a faith in his God through his trials; that he could say: "Though He (God) slay me, yet will I trust Him....". (Job

13:15) We find that there's a turning point within the book of Job, and at the end - the last chapter - we read: "And the Lord restored Job's losses..." (42:10). He was blessed again, he was given health, he was given his friends back, he was given a beautiful family and abundance of riches. We read, he lived another 140 years and he died being full of days (42:16-17).

The sufferer will be blessed if, in the midst of great agony and despair, he can look into the face of his Heavenly Father and, because of His eternal love and presence, be grateful. Our response to suffering should lead us to look beyond it in the attempt to see God's higher purposes and what He wants to teach us.

Tonight as we begin our series on "Tempered by Trials" looking at Biblical character as they are molded through the crucible of pain. In this the first in our series we will be looking at the life of Abraham.

Let me give you a brief biography of this man's life. His life spans in the biblical record, from chapter 12 of the book of Genesis right through to chapter 24.

From the beginning, when God called Abraham out of the Ur of Chaldees (Gen 12), God had promised this childless man that he would make him into a great nation. This promise was repeated and enlarged many times down through the years. And although it seems foolish from a human standpoint for Abraham to have believed God – he did. And finally when was 100 years old, long after he and his wife were past the childbearing years, his son, Isaac was born.

God has brought this man through some very definite crises, each of which was a real exercise of his soul, a real strain upon his heart. Some he did fairly well on and in some he fell flat on his face. And since Abraham had his fair share of agonies and we could spend all night looking at them, but I want to single out one in particular: the greatest agony of all. It's found in chapter Genesis 22:1. "Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."

As I stated this morning we all hate tests, and only thing worse are finals. Abraham's whole life so far has been leading up to this challenge of faith, this supreme test, the greatest test of all. Many times in Abraham's life, his faith failed him. But the beautiful thing of it all that I want you to see tonight: although his faith failed him, God never ever failed him.

"Abraham loved Isaac and was extremely proud of him, but even more important all of Abraham's spiritual hopes were centered in him....his own hope of heaven was centered in God's promise of the redeemer that was to come out of the line of Isaac..." [James Montgomery Boice. Genesis: An Expository Commentary. (12:1- 36:43) Vol 2. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985) p. 218]

I can almost see him with worshipful eyes as he looks on that his son, thinking of the promises of God, and thinking of the miracle of God in his life - but, my friend, God had to have that place! God must occupy the highest place in our hearts.

Look with me at what Abraham learned as he was “Tempered by Trials.”

First, *Sometimes We Must Let Go Of What You Love* (v. 2)

"Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."

Things were going great and then out of the dark of the night there was a voice saying: *“Abraham, Abraham, Take now your son, your only son Isaac. Take him to Mount Moriah; offer him there as a sacrifice unto me.”* I imagine, friends, that for Abraham the stars fell out of heaven, and it seemed as if the sand beneath his feet opened to swallow him - he couldn't believe that this, his son of promise, was to be taken away from him! The turmoil in his mind and in his heart, the spiritual wrestling perhaps that he is going through, is to realize that God gave this son and now God wants to take him away again! But Why?"

What more poignant account can you find in all the Old Testament than the dramatic scene described in this text? The heart of Abraham must have nearly broken when God said, *“Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love,.... and offer him there as a burnt offering...”* (Gen. 22:2).

At first glance it almost seems that God is mocking Abraham. *“Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love.”* Why did God put it that way? Had Isaac grown too dear to Abraham's heart? Had he begun to take God's place in his thinking?

But notice Abraham's response. He quickly arose and traveled 3 days with Isaac until they reached the place of sacrifice. I wonder what thoughts crowded his mind during that long journey. Did he doubt God's wisdom? Surely this question must have raced through his mind: If Isaac, who was born as the result of a miracle, is the son of promise, why is God asking me to slay him? The patriarch, Abraham, however, did not retreat, disobey, or turn aside to avoid making this ultimate sacrifice.

God is leading each of us to the place where He asks us all to sacrifice our Isaac, to let go of the thing that we love. My friend, listen: God wants every child of His to get to the place where everything in their life is consecrated to Him, sacrificed to Him.

When you can learn to let go of the thing you love, the thing you're worrying about, the child that is breaking your heart, the problems that are in your life that you're wracking your brains to try and solve, when you let go of them the miracle of God's grace is this: He gives you back something far greater!

The Chinese evangelist Watchman Nee wrote, that Isaac “represents the many gifts of God's grace. Before God gives them our hands are empty. Afterwards they are full. Sometimes God reaches out his hand to take ours in fellowship. Then we need an empty hand to put into his. But when we have received his gifts and are nursing them to ourselves, our hands are full,

and when God puts out his hand we have no empty hand for him." [Watchman Nee. *Changed Into His Likeness*. (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1967) p. 62]

When that happens we need to let go of the gift and take hold of the giver!

Secondly, *Obey Even When You Don't Understand (v. 3)* "So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son; and he split the wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him."

I don't know whether he wrestled through the night with it, but I'll tell you this: he got up early in the morning, and he did everything that was needed, he prepared. Now if you've been in the Christian life any length you will know that it's hard sometimes to obey God, especially when things don't seem to be right, when things don't make sense - but God is saying to you and saying to me and saying to Abraham: "*Get up that mountain! Obey Me even when you don't understand, even when things don't make sense.*"

From verse 3 right through the whole chapter until he actually comes to the Mount, you find him doing absolutely everything in preparation for sacrificing his own child.

My friend, get up the mountain whatever it is, and trust the Lord! Do God's will and let Him worry about the consequences! You see, when you let your Isaac go over to God it's His responsibility.

What mountain are you afraid to climb tonight? What hill is too high?

So Abraham took his son, he gave him over to God mentally and spiritually, and then he climbed the mountain.

Third, Trust Even When No Solution Seems Possible (v. 5) "And Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the lad and I will go yonder and worship, and we will come back to you."

For the first time in Abraham's experience with God he is confronted with a conflict between God's command and God's promise. If Abraham is obedient to God's command to sacrificing Isaac then how can God's promise that he will make a mighty nation of Abraham's seed be fulfilled.

How could this problem be resolved?

There are at least two possibilities. First, Abraham could have concluded that God is inconsistent, having one plan at one time and then changing his mind and having another.

But there is also a second alternative; Abraham could conclude that just because he was only human and was unable to fathom the answer, did not mean that God could not be trusted

to have an answer. In the end Abraham acted in a manner consistent with his knowledge of God that is he trusted him.

In verse five Abraham told his servants “we” will come back. Abraham did not know what was going to happen on that mountain but one thing he was sure of, both of them would be coming back down. The New Living Translation of Hebrews 11:18 tells us that, “Abraham assumed that if Isaac died, God was able to bring him back to life again. And in a sense, Abraham did receive his son back from the dead.”

We as believers are called upon to do the same that is when cannot see the plan, when we cannot see any solution to the problem, trust God anyway.

Fourth, Believe Even In The Midst Of Emotional Turmoil (vv. 7-8) “But Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." “Then he said, "Look, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?”

Imagine Abraham’s feelings when the Lord told him to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. Think of what was going through his mind as they climbed Mount Moriah and Isaac asked, “...where is the lamb?” Yet Abraham had faith that God would provide, and he assured Isaac of his confidence. (v.8) “And Abraham said, "My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering.”

Fifth, Depend On The God Of Provision (vv. 9-14) “Then they came to the place of which God had told him. And Abraham built an altar there and placed the wood in order; and he bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. (10) And Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. (11) But the Angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" So he said, "Here I am." (12) And He said, "Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.”

(13) Then Abraham lifted his eyes and looked, and there behind him was a ram caught in a thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram, and offered it up for a burnt offering instead of his son. (14) And Abraham called the name of the place, The-LORD-Will-Provide; as it is said to this day, "In the Mount of the LORD it shall be provided.”

Abraham gave his son back to God. His willingness was regarded with these words of divine approval: “for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.” (Gen. 22:12). When Abraham gave his son back to God, then God (22:15-19) told him that immediately the promise of fruitfulness would be fulfilled. Even God’s gifts to us are of no value until we are willing, if necessary, to lose them so that God can have his rightful place in our hearts.

God always provides for the right thing, in the right place, at the right time.

“In the centuries that have followed, God has continued to demonstrate that He does provide for His own. Dr. Robert Schindler and his wife Marian founded a mission hospital associated with radio station ELWA in Monrovia, Liberia. In their book *Mission Possible* they wrote, “For us, it was a continued exercise of faith that we would have the right drugs and supplies at the right time. We recall how much we counted on our X-ray machine, something we take for granted (at home). We even had the opportunity to get an extra one when a friend of ours, a doctor with the U.S. Embassy, asked if we could use a portable X-ray machine...But then as the months dragged out, we knew it must be lost at sea. Then one day our big X-ray machine stopped working....We found it was a major problem which would take several months to fix....But that very afternoon, the ... truck pulled up to the hospital with a huge crate from port. You guessed it—it was the portable X-ray machine! We plugged it in, and it worked! We didn’t lose a day for X-rays.” [Our Daily Bread, Monday, June 10. www.bible.org/illus/Genesis]

God did provide a Lamb nineteen hundred years later in Christ. God stayed Abraham’s hand and did not let him go through with the sacrifice of Isaac because it would have been wrong. God spared Abraham’s son, but God did not spare His own Son but gave Him up freely for us all.