

Lesson 8

God's Heart: His Empowering Growth

Introduction: God wants us to know and trust Him, but we don't naturally put our trust in strangers, do we? Until we come to know a person's character, there is always that element of doubt. God knows that, so He has given us the Bible to show us Who He is and what He is like. The more we understand and accept what He has revealed about Himself through these Old Testament stories, the more we will be able to believe the promises that He has promised us throughout the New Testament. This is exactly the work that we see God doing in the life of Abram. All the while God was using him to bring about the Nation of Israel and ultimately the line of Christ, God was at the same time revealing Himself more and more Abram and showing him Who He truly is. God fulfilled His promise to give Abraham and Sarah a son.

Sometimes we tend to view Abraham as this great man of faith. God commanded him to leave his homeland and go to where God would show him, and he immediately left and believed God. Well, it wasn't quite like that, was it? The same is true regarding God's promise to give Abraham and Sarah a son. Again, we can tend to focus on Abraham and think of him as this great man of faith who always trusted in and believed God. The truth is, though, growing in the knowledge of God and our ability to trust Him is a true growth process. Though we do have times of genuinely believing

and trusting God, we also have many times of doubt and unbelief. Abraham was no different. Without God patiently and persistently revealing Himself to Abraham, he would have no chance of becoming the figure of faith we know him to be today.

- **Read Genesis 20.**

Now, keep in mind that Abraham had just seen God enable his 318 servants go and defeat four kings and their armies, after which he himself proclaimed God as “The Most High God.” Then, he saw God miraculously and graciously deliver Lot and his family from Sodom and Gomorrah before raining down fire and brimstone and bringing about its destruction. After seeing God do these great and mighty acts with his own eyes, you’d think that he certainly wouldn’t have been afraid to claim Sarah as his wife, but he doubted and couldn’t trust God in this circumstance. In this one account, we clearly see who man is and Who God is.

Regarding Abraham, it’s pretty clear that he doubted and couldn’t trust God. Not only was he deceitful, but he was perfectly willing to allow Sarah to be taken by Abimelech to be his wife. It would appear that Abraham was so concerned about himself, that he totally lost sight of God’s promise to give him and SARAH a son.

There are three human characters in this account: Abraham, Sarah, and Abimelech. In all three of them, we see them living and functioning in

light of the truth of **Genesis 8:21**— “every thought and intent of man’s heart is only evil from childhood.” Abraham doubted God, took matters into his own hands, and was willing to send Sarah into Abimelech’s arms.

Sarah on her part was willing to go into the arms of another man. Abimelech proclaimed his righteousness to God in verses 4 and 5, but God set him straight in verse 6 when He said, yes, I know that you didn’t touch her, but “I also withheld you from sinning against Me.”

Had God left the carrying out of His plan up to the faithfulness of mankind, His plan would have been ruined over and over and over. God Himself stated that “every thought and intent of man’s heart is only evil from childhood” and we see Him working and intervening in light of that fact.

Not only do we see God’s sovereignty and omnipotence as He divinely intervened, but we also see His grace and mercy. Abraham’s unbelief didn’t affect God’s ability to still carry out His plan, nor did it change God’s desire and willingness to use Abraham and Sarah IN His plan. Not only would God continue to use them in His plan, but right then and there God listened to and answered Abraham’s prayer on Abimelech’s behalf.

Here was a man whose every thought and intent of his heart is only evil from childhood; he doubted God and couldn’t trust Him, yet God uses his prayer to heal Abimelech, his wife, and his servants! Folks, this is a picture of us Christians and

God's interaction with us and the way He uses us in the lives of other people. Not one of us deserves to be used by God for anything, but in His grace He does.

- **Read Genesis 21:1-3.**

Though many years had passed since God first promised to give Abraham a son, God had not forgotten. God always does what He says He will do. Sarah had a son just as God had said she would. Abraham and Sarah named him Isaac. Again, keep in mind that Sarah was 90 and Abraham was 100. From the very beginning, God has been working in ways to reveal His glory and attributes to mankind, as well as the fact that all of this is about HIM CARRYING OUT HIS PLAN! Over and over and over, He orchestrates circumstances that only HE can cause to happen.

But before God brought about the birth of Isaac, we can't forget about what took place with Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar back in chapter 16. Abraham and Sarah, due to the circumstances of their ages, took matters into their own hands and tried to fulfill God's promise of a son according to their own understanding. Once again, just as it was the last time that Abraham wavered in unbelief, it didn't derail God's plan or His faithfulness. It also didn't change the fact that God was going to use Abraham and Sarah and still give them their own son. This again emphasizes the sovereign grace of

God, as well as the fact that man is so desperately sinful, that the only way that God can use him in His plan is by God continually divinely intervening.

One last point before moving on to chapter 22. You will notice in verse 33 that Abraham here refers to God as, “The Everlasting God.” This is another new reference to God on the part of Abraham. It continues to show his progression in growing in the knowledge of God.

God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac.

- **Read Genesis 22:1-2.**

At this point, many years had passed since Isaac was born and he was now a young man. A couple of things point to this fact. The Hebrew word used in these verses for “son” or “lad” is the same word that is used in other places to mean “young men.” One of those places is the very next verse; verse 3: “Abraham took along two of his young men.”

Also is the fact that Isaac was strong enough to carry enough firewood for the sacrifice up the mountain. He couldn’t have been a little boy. Lastly, according to Josephus the Jewish historian, Isaac was about 27 years old when this event took place.

The temptation is to look at this interaction between God and Abraham as God testing Abraham

to see if his love and respect for God was greater than it was for his son Isaac. Though there may have been something individual and personal that God was working to bring about in the life of Abraham regarding his relationship with God—not only for Abraham and his relationship with God, but also as an example for all who were to come. I believe, though, the real purpose for this was much bigger and far reaching.

We need to keep coming back to God’s eternal plan of redemption that was on His heart from before time began. Therefore, the intentionality of God in all that He has been doing up to this point has all been for the purpose of carrying out and fulfilling that plan. Of all the people on earth, Abraham was the one He chose to bring about the line of Christ, the Nation of Israel, the people through whom the Deliverer would be brought into the world. Abraham was an idol worshipper who didn’t know God. He was married to a barren wife. God waited till they were 90 and 100 years old to give them Isaac. And now here, God told him to go and sacrifice him.

First of all, God was making it absolutely crystal clear to all to come that this was all about Him carrying out His plan. We have seen so many absolutely impossible things happen; there is no way anyone could even remotely think any of this was done by man.

Lastly, because of God’s purpose in choosing Abraham and giving him Isaac, God was giving a “type” or a physical picture of the

promised One to come and what some of the specifics would be regarding how He would fulfill the eternal plan of redemption.

Abraham believed God.

This “struggle” that God caused to take place in the heart of Abraham was an important struggle for Abraham. It’s also a struggle that God allows us to experience today as well. The struggle was regarding the fact that God had asked Abraham to do something that he didn’t understand. It appeared to Abraham that God was going back on His promise. I am sure there was much of this that didn’t make sense to Abraham. In the end, without understanding “WHY,” Abraham had to just settle on the facts of WHO God is and what God is like. Abraham had seen God’s faithfulness, His power, His sovereignty, and had never seen God do anything that wasn’t for his good.

Therefore, **Hebrews 11:19** says that Abraham “concluded”. That even though he didn’t understand what God was asking him to do, he knew he could still trust Him because of Who He is and what He’s done in the past. Without God repeatedly revealing His faithfulness in Abraham’s life, there’s no way He would have even considered sacrificing his son, yet there he was, considering it.

It’s interesting to note the growth you can see in the life of Abraham. Early on he didn’t know God and couldn’t trust Him. He lied about his wife and he and Sarah tried to bring about God’s promise

of a son according to their own understanding; but here we see a willingness to sacrifice that son, believing that God will still fulfill His promise. This is an obvious progression in Abraham's knowledge of and trust in God.

Discussion:

Is God doing this same work in our lives today? If so, how does He do it?

Abraham and Isaac went to make the sacrifice.

- **Read Genesis 22:3-8.**

Isaac, no doubt, had witnessed many animal sacrifices. Knowing that they were preparing to make a sacrifice to God, he questioned his father because he could not understand why they hadn't taken a lamb with them. Obviously, Abraham hadn't told Isaac yet what God had instructed him to do. I love Abraham's answer: "*My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering.*" WOW! Talk about a physical picture of future spiritual truth! Abraham had totally abandoned himself to the sovereign will of God, and Abraham could not have arrived at this event of abandonment had God not revealed His character throughout Abraham's life.

- **Read Genesis 22:9-10.**

Isaac's situation here—tied up, laying on an altar with a knife about to come down on him and sacrifice him—is a physical picture of the spiritual condition that every single one of us was born into. He couldn't untie himself or deliver himself from being sacrificed.

Unless God provided a lamb substitute to die for Isaac, Isaac was going to die. We have already seen this pattern a number of other times. The people in Noah's day who did not believe God, once God had shut the door, there was nothing they could do to deliver themselves from the imminent judgment. Noah, his family, and the animals were all delivered from the flood because God had provided a way for them. When it came time to judge Sodom and Gomorrah, there was nothing that the inhabitants could do to deliver themselves. Lot's wife was also judged with no way of delivering herself because she had rejected God's warning. Lot and his daughters on the other hand were escorted out to safety, even though Lot kept arguing and dragging his feet.

Because “every thought and intent of the heart” of EVERY human being is “only evil from childhood,” unless God divinely intervenes, it is impossible for us to deliver ourselves.

God provided a ram to take Isaac's place.

- **Read Genesis 22:11-13.**

Here we have God continuing to add to the “type” or the physical picture of future spiritual truth. Abraham looked to and relied solely upon God for a substitute sacrifice for his son. God, on His own initiative, provided a substitute to die in Isaac’s place.

The substitute met the criteria for what would constitute an acceptable sacrifice. See **Exodus 12:5; Leviticus 5:18**. Isaac was removed from the altar and the ram was placed and sacrificed there in his stead. This was a clear physical picture of the future coming Deliverer Who would become the “Lamb of God.”

God reaffirms His promise to send the Deliverer through Abraham’s descendants.

- **Read Genesis 22:14-19.**

Notice how Abraham’s reference to this location was in light of Who God is and what He had done in Abraham’s and Isaac’s lives through this incident. Again, life is about God, Who He is and all that He is doing as He continues to unfold His eternal plan of redemption in all of our lives today.

Discussion:

How do we view the circumstances in our own lives today? As “The God who provides”, or with annoyance and anger?

This act of God providing a substitute for Isaac is as significantly referred to in history (as a type of Christ) as the Passover is! In order to bring this about in Abraham’s life, God first spent a great deal of time revealing Himself to Abraham, causing him to grow in his knowledge of and ability to trust in God.

Another example of God’s exclusive role in an individual’s spiritual growth can be found in the life of Elijah and his interactions with the Widow at Zarephath.

- **Read 1 Kings 17:7-16**

God commands that Elijah go into Sidon to be supplied with food by a widow. When he encounters that widow, and asks for food, she says she doesn’t have any, and that she is preparing for her final meal. She has lost any hope of changing her situation. This is a picture of our inability to feed ourselves, physically or spiritually, apart from God.

God promises that the jug of flour and oil will not be used up until the drought ends, and there is enough food for Elijah, the widow, and her family. How could that not strengthen her faith?

Going from hopelessness to abundance. But what happens when that faith is tested?

- **Read 1 Kings 17:17-24**

After God's miraculous daily provision, her son falls ill, and the woman has the gumption to ask Elijah "What do you have against me? You came to kill my son!" How quickly she forgot how Elijah had been instrumental in feeding her and her son.

God chooses to spare the boy's life, and the widow acknowledges the validity of Elijah's prophethood. Had God not revealed his faithfulness and grace in her life over and over, her faith quickly falters. We see it slip following the death of her son.

This happens to us. Our faith is very easily tested, and we forget God's persistent goodness throughout our walks. Without that revelation of His character, there would be no chance that we would grow in the knowledge of Him, which is paramount for our spiritual growth.

To see more of this topic unpacked, read lesson 17 from the complete Knowing God book.