

(Devotional #16) **Character Studies from Hebrews 11:1-40**
Heroes of the Faith: Abraham and the Binding of Isaac
(Hebrews 11:13-19; Titus 1:1-3; Genesis 22:1-19;)

THE BINDING OF ISAAC

Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains, of which I will tell you –
Genesis 22:2

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten (son) of whom it was said (promised) ‘IN ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS SHALL BE NAMED. HE CONSIDERED THAT GOD IS ABLE TO RAISE (ISAAC) EVEN FROM THE DEAD, FROM WHICH HE ALSO RECEIVED HIM BACK AS A TYPE’ –
Hebrews 11:17-19

Where does morality come from? What makes something right or wrong? There are many ways I could attempt to answer this question¹ – but I’ll focus only on a couple so you can get a feel for the issue.

(Possibility No. 1) RIGHT AND WRONG ARE CULTURALLY DETERMINED:

Some people believe ‘rightness’ and ‘wrongness,’ if we want to think abstractly, are determined by culture. If something is approved by the culture, then it is right, but if the culture disapproves of the thing, then it is wrong. The problem with this is, **right and wrong become nothing more than the totality of social consensus**. Said another way, **morality becomes a matter of opinion**. And if *the moral opinion is man’s opinion*, then it carries with it no moral authority, for it is the product of a fallen race that Scripture describes as *never* capable of making a righteous choice².

(Possibility No. 2) RIGHT AND WRONG ARE DETERMINED BY FEELINGS:

Christians may be more likely to fall into **‘the feelings trap’** than they are to believe right and wrong are just matters of opinion. Whereas the former method of moral determination is cultural in nature, this way of viewing morality is wholly subjective – in other words, morality comes from inside the individual and is self-determined. Sometimes you will hear it said, **‘what is wrong for you is right for me’** – (or vice versa). In this case, ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ are nothing more than **good or bad ‘feelings’** – and it should be apparent that nothing is more fickle in the human psyche than feelings. Scripture tells us: **“God sees not as a man sees³.”** We simply do not have the divine perspective, nor the ability to see things as God sees them. And to the extent we look within ourselves for moral truth, we will fall further into moral error.

Unfortunately, the human race has been polluted by sin from the time of Adam, and sin has rendered mankind incapable of making correct moral choices, if those choices are made on the basis of anything other than the revealed Word of God. When in the Garden of Eden, Satan was tempting Eve, he said something very interesting regarding God’s prohibition regarding **the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil**; he said: **“You surely will not die⁴, for God knows that in the day you eat from it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”** **He was right (SORT OF)!** Adam and his wife did come to know GOOD and EVIL ... but not

¹ Examples include pain vs. pleasure, mutual interests, rationality, etc.

² See Romans 3:10-18

³ See 1 Samuel 16:7

⁴ This is the first lie told in the Bible. Satan, the Father of Lies (John 8:44), contrary to the Word of God, told Eve: ‘there will be no consequences for disobeying the Word of God’ – Genesis 3:4-5.

in the way they envisioned. *They came to know **GOOD** – but they no longer could do **GOOD**; and they came to know **EVIL** – but they no longer could avoid doing **EVIL**.* Everything changed for the human race that day in antiquity – and because of what happened there, ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ cannot be determined by culture, or by subjective feelings, or by any other means, **EXCEPT BY THE REVEALED WORD OF GOD**. The reason the revealed Word of God is our only source for understanding morality is because in His Word, **GOD HAS REVEALED TO US HIS OWN CHARACTER**.

So, let’s revisit the original question, ‘*How is morality determined*’? *Let me put forth the following premise:*

‘No thing, thought, or action is right in and of itself, nor is a thing right because God said it is right⁵. A thing, thought, or action is right when it is consistent with God’s Attributes,’ i.e., when it is in harmony with the very Character of God Himself.

Titus 1:1-3 is an interesting passage because verse two contains the phrase, “**God, who cannot lie.**” Now this phrase is important because by it, God has set a limit even on Himself – **HE CANNOT LIE**⁶! We know lying is wrong ... we are told this throughout Scripture. Our mortal enemy, Satan, is referred to by Jesus as, “**the Father of lies**” – **John 8:44**.

Now the opposite of a lie is the truth, so if God cannot lie, then it follows, ‘**God always tells the truth.**’ Truth is inherently part of God’s Character, and therefore it is a Divine Attribute (*usually referred to as ‘**DIVINE VERACITY**’ by Systematic Theologians*). **Lying is ‘wrong’** because it contradicts the very nature of God expressed by His Attribute of Divine Veracity.

What About Abraham?

So, what happens if God commands one of his servants to commit an act that is contrary to the divine nature? To get specific, can a Righteous God command His servant, Abraham, to perform an act of child sacrifice – which Abraham knows contradicts the Divine Character? — So then the question becomes, ‘**if Abraham obeys God’s command, is he committing a righteous act or a sin**⁷’?

Let’s review our first lesson on Abraham – God chose Abraham to be the Father of an elect nation, Israel. This elect nation was to be the custodian of the Scriptures, and the conduit through which the Messiah would come into the world to fulfill the promise of Genesis 3:15.

When God called Abraham out of Mesopotamia and told him to walk west, Abraham responded in faith and, in an act of faith-renewal in Genesis 15:6, “**righteousness was credited to Abraham on the basis of faith-alone.**” Furthermore, God’s promises to Abraham were encapsulated in a covenant known as the Abrahamic Covenant⁸. The three central promises codified in God’s covenant with Abraham are: **LAND, SEED, and BLESSING**. God promised Abraham ‘**A LAND,**’ (*the Promised Land, Israel*), He promised him ‘**A SEED,**’ (*i.e., descendants to populate the Promised*

⁵ That is, a thing is not right as a result of an arbitrary divine choice, for God does not make arbitrary choices.

⁶ The phrase does not say **GOD DOES NOT LIE**; it says **GOD CANNOT LIE**.

⁷ This question was raised by the Danish theologian, Søren Kierkegaard in his book, *Fear and Trembling*. He phrased the question, ‘**is there a teleological suspension of the ethical**’? In other words, ‘*can God declare something to be right that is inherently wrong*’? Or perhaps better, ‘*is something right because God said it is right, or is there an abstract ‘rightness’ to which God Himself is required to submit*’?

⁸ The Abrahamic Covenant is developed in Scripture over time. Here are some of the more significant passages pertaining to this covenant: Genesis 12:1-3; 15:1-21; 17:1-27; 35:10-12; Joshua 1:2-6; 21:43-45; 1 Chronicles 16:15-18; Isaiah 49:6; Jeremiah 25:9-12; Ezekiel 37:21-25; Daniel 9:2; Romans 11:1-32.

Land, ultimately culminating in the birth of the Messiah), and **'BLESSING.'** *Apart from the fulfillment of all three promises, the covenant collapses into nothing more than empty promises.*

And key to the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant is the son promised to Abraham and Sarah. The author of Hebrews said, **'IN ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS SHALL BE NAMED'**.⁹ ***So, covenant fulfillment rests on Isaac.*** Without Isaac, the promises die with Abraham, and as we see in Hebrews 11:13, ***“Abraham died in faith without receiving the promises ... but having welcomed them from a distance.”***

When in Genesis 22, God told Abraham to offer up Isaac as a burnt offering, far more was at stake than Isaac's life. We tend to read Genesis 22 and think about the terrible loss of a son – and certainly that is part of it. But more than that, God asked the old patriarch for far more than his son – ***He asked Abraham to give up his every hope and dream ... and even the covenant itself.*** For without Isaac, everything Abraham had based his life upon – the very reason he left Mesopotamia and came to Canaan in the first place – all of it was about to go up in the smoke of the burnt offering. It is as if God had said, ***“Abraham, everything you have believed about me is a lie. I never intended for you to inherit this land, I never planned to give you a line of descendants. When I said I would make you a great nation, it was all a lie – and as for your life of faith – it has been for nothing.”***

But according to Titus 1:2, God cannot lie, so there must be something else going on in Genesis 22 than what meets the eye. Listen to the words of Jeremiah:

Because they ... have built the high places of Ba'al to BURN THEIR SONS IN THE FIRE AS BURNT OFFERINGS to Ba'al, a thing I NEVER COMMANDED or spoke of, NOR DID IT EVER ENTER MY MIND – Jeremiah 19:4

They built the high places of Ba'al that are in the Valley of Ben-hinnom TO CAUSE THEIR SONS AND THEIR DAUGHTERS TO PASS THROUGH THE FIRE to Molech, which I HAD NOT COMMANDED THEM NOR HAD IT ENTERED MY MIND THAT THEY SHOULD DO THIS ABOMINATION, to cause Judah to sin – Jeremiah 32:35

God never intended for Abraham to offer Isaac as a burnt offering because to do so would have been an abomination. *Hebrews 11:17* says, ***“when he was tested.”*** A test occurs when God puts us in a situation we cannot control and in which we have to make a choice: ***‘are we going to trust God, or are we going to flounder along trying to solve problems that are greater than we are?’***

We all experience testing of various kinds – testing by a professor to see if we know the classroom material, or the challenge of thinking our way through a math problem. Some tests are moral tests, others are financial or medical in nature – but every one of us will be tested. And when we are tested, will we trust what God has said, or will we attempt to solve our problems on our own? It certainly would not be wrong to view the current pandemic as a test of faith. When we are worried, or find ourselves unemployed, or perhaps even ill as a result of the virus – will we trust God? Will we trust Him to be faithful to us? Do we believe He will provide for us? Is He our refuge and our strength? Do we believe He is the source of peace in difficult times? Abraham can be an example for us, for living by faith is not relegated to ancient times; it is a practical way of living for us today.

Verse 17 continues, “when he was tested, he offered up Isaac.” We know from the Genesis 22 account, Abraham did not actually offer up Isaac, for God intervened and provided the ram that

⁹ *Hebrews 11:18; see also Romans 9:6-7 and Genesis 21:1-7*

Abraham sacrificed in the place of his son, Isaac¹⁰. But Hebrews 11:17 says, “*he offered up Isaac.*” It is phrased this way because from the moment Abraham made the choice to obey the Lord, even though doing so would cost him everything, Isaac was from that time forward, ‘*dead to Abraham.*’ God fully honored Abraham’s decision to obey, then God provided a solution honoring that decision, while at the same time preventing Abraham from committing an abomination.

Verse 17 began with the words, “*by faith.*” How was Abraham’s faith expressed? Verse 19 says, “*He (Abraham) considered that God is able to raise (Isaac) even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type.*” This verse separates for us the thing that is Abraham’s responsibility from the thing that is God’s responsibility – something we are not always adept at doing.

- (1) Abraham’s responsibility was to trust and obey the LORD, even when doing so contradicted everything he knew and believed.
- (2) God’s responsibility was to fulfill His covenant promises, even if doing so required raising Isaac from the dead.

To understand the story of Abraham and Isaac, you must understand these two, separate roles: (a) Abraham’s role was to trust God; (b) God was responsible for determining how to fulfill His covenant through what Abraham anticipated to be, ‘*a dead Isaac.*’

For verse 19 goes on to say, “*from which (i.e., from the dead) he also received him back as a type.*” This part of the verse asks us to recall the story of Isaac’s birth. NOW WE UNDERSTAND WHY GOD WAITED SO LONG TO GIVE ABRAHAM AND SARAH THE PROMISED SON. Abraham remembered that Isaac’s birth was a miracle ... after all, Sarah was 90 and Abraham was 100-years old when Isaac was born! And if God could give Abraham a son, when Abraham and Sarah’s bodies were as good as dead ... how hard would it be for God to perform another miracle? When Hebrews says, “*as a type,*” what is meant is this: ‘*Isaac’s birth was a foreshadowing of what would take place years later on Mount Moriah. And it points forward even further to the miraculous birth and resurrection of the Messiah, Jesus Christ.*’

Sometimes we make life too complicated. I once had a job shoveling dirt. It was a hard job and toward the end of my first day, I could no longer lift an entire shovel-full of dirt ... so I filled only the front half of the shovel ... and to lift even half-a-shovel was a challenge. I saw my boss laughing. He walked over and said to me, “*son, if you will fill up the back half of that shovel, the front half will take care of itself.*” Perhaps the lesson is this: ‘*our responsibility during difficult times is pretty simple: TRUST THE LORD. Leave the heavy lifting to Him. He is more than capable of bringing us through every challenge He puts before us.*’ **TRUST THE LORD** and let the rest of the details and issues of life rest with Him.

Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit – Romans 15:13

¹⁰ This may be the most perfect picture in the Old Testament of the Substitutionary Atonement. In Genesis, God provided a ram that died in the place of Isaac, so that Isaac might live. In the New Testament, Jesus is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29). God stopped Abraham from striking down his own son (Genesis 22:12), but no angel called out to God the Father to halt when He struck His Son, Jesus Christ, at Calvary (cf. Isaiah 52:12–53:12, Matthew 27:46, and Psalm 22:1).