

Studies in James

Lesson 9

Justification by Works

INTRODUCTION:

- I. In his book THE MAKING OF A MAN OF GOD, Dr. Alan Redpath once wrote, "The conversion of a soul is the miracle of a moment, but the manufacture of a saint is the task of a lifetime."
 - A. One of the ways the Lord uses to develop us into people of God is to put us through trials.
 1. In this process (of trials), He takes from us those things we want to hold onto tightly.
 2. Once they are removed from us, God shows us we can lean on Him and find much more in Him than we could have found if we had held onto those things.
 - B. A classic example of this is found in the life of Abraham.
 1. In **James 2:21** the following question appears: "*Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?*"

- a. In asking this question, James was saying that Abraham's was proven to be GENUINE and REAL by placing his son on the alter to become a sacrifice.
 - b. That act of faith "JUSTIFIED" the validity of Abraham's faith.
2. Therefore, let's turn our attention to this even in the life of Abraham that's found in **Genesis chapter 22**, and see what we can learn about his faith.
- a. More specifically, we want to see HOW Abraham's faith proved his faith to be GENUINE and REAL.
 - b. Then we want to learn how WE ALSO can be justified by works coupled with our faith – in other words, we want to see how our faith can be VALIDATED and proven to be AUTHENTIC by the works we do.
- C. Let's consider the text together.
1. **Genesis 22:1-19** – *Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." Then He said, "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." 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. Then on the third day Abraham lifted his eyes and saw the place afar off. 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." So Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife, and the two of them went together. 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?" And Abraham said, "My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering." So the two of them went together. 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. And Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the Angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" So he said, "Here I am." 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." 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. 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." Then the Angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time out of heaven, and said: "By Myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son — blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice." So Abraham returned to his young men, and they rose and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham dwelt at Beersheba.

BODY:

- I. A study of the life of Abraham reveals that Abraham experienced FOUR MAJOR CRISES during his lifetime.
 - A. **Genesis 22:1** opens with the words, *"Now it came about after these things."*

1. This phrase is followed by a detailed account of the offering of Isaac.
 2. This event constitutes the **FOURTH MAJOR CRISIS** of Abraham's life.
 - a. "*These things*" refers to the preceding three crises he had already faced.
- B. Let's briefly look at each crisis. And in each of these crisis' we will see God separating Abraham from something or someone.
1. The first major crisis was leaving his home in Ur. **(Genesis 12)**
 - a. When Abraham was seventy-five years old, God began to do significant work in his life.
 - b. But God called Abraham away from all he knew and loved.
 2. The second major crisis was separating from his nephew Lot. **(Genesis 13)**
 - a. Abraham loved Lot and didn't want to leave him. He knew Lot was weak and needed his association.
 - b. However, the Lord wanted to build Abraham into a man of God and chose to separate the two.
 3. The third major crisis was having to abandon his plans for his **FIRSTBORN** son. **(Genesis 17)**

- a. Abraham's firstborn son was Ishmael (born to Hagar, Sarah's handmaiden).
 - b. God never intended for Abraham to realize God's promised blessing through THAT particular son.
 - c. Instead, God wanted to work HIS OWN plan through a son who would be born to Abraham's OWN wife at a later date.
4. And finally, the fourth major crisis was obeying God's command to offer up his son Isaac as a sacrifice. **(Genesis 22)**
- a. As we will see, this was the GREATEST of all the tests that Abraham endured.
- II. As we take a closer look at this event, I want you to notice THREE KEY ELEMENTS: The test; Abraham's response to the test; and finally God's reward.
- A. First, THE TEST.
1. Moses tells us, *"Now it came about after these things, that God TESTED Abraham..."* (Genesis 22:1)
 - a. The Hebrew word *"tested"* is a very intense word, and suggests the idea of being tested intensely – in other words, Abraham's testing was DEEP.
 2. There are times in our OWN lives when God's tests are intense.

- a. It's interesting to know from this that God NOT ONLY plans the TIME of the trial, and the LENGTH of the trial, but also the INTENSITY of the trial.
3. God told Abraham, *"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."* (v. 2)
 - a. This child was especially dear to Abraham, since Isaac was born when Abraham was 100 years old (Sarah was 90). Isaac would have been in his late teens when God gave Abraham these orders.
 - (1). I can only imagine what it would be like for a parent to lose ANY child, ESPECIALLY one you've brought up and loved for the past 17 or 18 years.
 - b. Not only was Abraham grieving over the potential loss of his son, but Abraham had been looking forward to God's blessings being fulfilled through Isaac – and NOW all that was changing. There would BE no Isaac.
 - (1). Just try to imagine the tremendous disappointment YOU would feel, knowing that God is removing a blessing, and HE HASN'T EVEN TOLD YOU WHY!

- c. Add to all this, THE WAY Abraham was to take Isaac's life.
 - (1). The particular term used here is "*burnt offering*" and comes from the Hebrew word "Olah," which means the sacrifice is COMPLETELY CONSUMED WITH FIRE until there is NOTHING LEFT but bone fragments and ashes.
 - (2). To MAKE this kind of sacrifice, it requires a LOT of wood to generate enough heat to completely CREMATE the offering – HORNS, HOOFS AND ALL.
- d. To MAKE this kind of sacrifice, Abraham would have to BIND his son Isaac to prevent him from escaping as the flames rise.
- e. Abraham would then have to slit the throat of his own son – draining all the blood away.
- f. The wood would then be ignited and the body of Isaac would be completely consumed.
 - (a). This would be NOTHING like the sacrifices GENERALLY made, when only a portion of the sacrificed animal was consumed in fire -- like the Passover sacrifices.
 - (b). This would be a TOTAL and COMPLETE CREMATION of Isaac's body – nothing but bone fragments and ashes.

B. Now notice ABRAHAM'S RESPONSE. There are FOUR things that characterize Abraham's response.

1. First, Abraham's response was immediate.

- a. The text says, "So Abraham rose early in the morning..." **(v. 3)**
 - b. One of the most effective ENEMIES of faith is procrastination – intentionally putting things off.
 - c. But, you don't see ANY of that here. We see Abraham moving forward with NO DEPART WHATSOEVER.
 - b. The VERY NEXT MORNING – EARLY the next morning – Abraham arose around sunrise, split the wood for the sacrifice, and departed for Mount Moriah with Isaac and two servants.
2. Second, Abraham's response was marked by faith.
- a. On the third day of the journey, Abraham saw the place of sacrifice in the distance. **(v. 4)**
 - (1). We can only IMAGINE the thoughts that ran through his heart and mind as he began thinking about what would happen there.
 - b. But there is a most REMARKABLE statement made by Abraham to his servants after they all arrived at the foot of the mountain. And we might MISS this if we simply read through the passage without much thought to what it's REALLY saying.
 - (1). When they arrived at the foot of the mountain, Abraham told his two servants, "*Stay here with the donkey; the lad*

*and I will go yonder and worship, and **WE WILL COME BACK TO YOU!" (Genesis 22:5)***

- (2). Abraham intended to take Isaac up the mountain, SACRIFICE his son as a "whole burnt offering," then BOTH of them would SOMEHOW walk back down that mountain together.
- (a). He didn't have all the answers, but he FULLY expected for God to keep HIS promise that through the seed of Isaac, a great nation would come. **(cf. Genesis 12:1-3; 15:1-6)**
- (b). Later, the writer of the book of Hebrews tells us that Abraham had COMPLETE CONFIDENCE in God keeping His promise, that Abraham FULLY believed God was SOMEHOW going to all those bone fragments and ashes back together again, and RAISE ISAAC UP FROM THE DEAD!
- (c). **Hebrews 11:17-19** – *By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, "In Isaac your seed shall be called," concluding that God was able to raise him*

up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense.

- c. The most touching scene imaginable comes, when the Scriptures say, *"So Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife, and the two of them went together."*

(Genesis 22:6)

- (1). It's hard to imagine what Abraham was thinking, and how he was going to explain all this to his son.
- (a). Incidentally, one reason we say Isaac was probably in his late teens or early twenties, is simply because he carried the firewood up the mountain all by himself – enough wood to completely cremate the sacrifice – something no small boy could do.
- (2). Abraham was CLEARLY walking by faith!
- (a). Someone once said, "Faith is SEEING the invisible, KNOWING the unknowable, BELIEVING the unbelievable so that we might ACCOMPLISH the impossible."
- (b). God is a SPECIALIST in impossibilities – and to Abraham, this WAS an impossibility.
- (c). But he knew God could do the impossible.

(4). The time may be coming in YOUR life when God will ASK YOU to cross seemingly UNCROSSABLE RIVERS, or scale seemingly UNSCALEABLE mountains.

(a). When He DOES, just remember, GOD
SPECIALIZES IN IMPOSSIBILITIES!

3. Third, Abraham's response was based on GOD'S character.
 - a. On their way up the mountain, Isaac asks his father, "...Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" **(v. 7)**
 - (1). It's as though he is saying, "I see the wood, and I see the fire you're carrying, and I see the knife... but where is the sacrifice?"
 - b. Abraham responded, "God will provide for Himself the lamb..." **(v. 8)**
 - c. Abraham believed in the CHARACTER of God.
 - (1). He knew God would provide His OWN offering for His OWN sacrifice – even if it had to be ISAAC.
4. And finally, Abraham's response was COMPLETE.
 - a. Notice, Abraham NEVER MISSED A STEP in carrying out the command of God.
 - (1). He rose early that morning and prepared the donkey
 - (2). He cut the wood.

- (3). He took the fire.
- (4). He took a knife.
- (5). He gathered stones and built an alter.
- (6). He carefully arranged the wood so that it will burn hot.
- (7). He bound Isaac.
- (8). He laid Isaac on the alter.
- (9). And raised the knife!

b. NOWHERE along the way do we see Abraham trying to cut corners.

- (1). Obedience has no room for cutting corners.

c. God knew that Abraham had the courage to PICK UP the knife and would NOT HESITATE to PERFORM the sacrifice.

- (1). In fact, in ONE sense ABRAHAM DID SACRIFICE
ISAAC!

- (2). As far as Abraham was concerned, Isaac was as good as
dead!

d. Even though Abraham loved Isaac dearly, he had come to a place where God meant more.

- (1). Besides, Isaac was GOD'S CHILD ANYWAY. (cf.

Psalms 127:3)

- e. When God stopped Abraham from taking his son's life, God KNEW Abraham's faith was GENUINE and REAL!

(1). **Genesis 22:12** – God told Abraham, *"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."*

(2). There was no need for further proof.

C. Finally, consider the REWARD OF GOD.

- 1. As a result of Abraham passing this MONUMENTAL TEST, two very important things happened:
 - a. God spared Isaac. **(v. 12)**
 - b. God also provided a SUBSTITUTE sacrifice. **(vs. 13-14)**

III. As we look back over this unforgettable story, what are some lessons WE can learn from all this?

A. Abraham's example is intended to encourage US when we go through our OWN times of crisis.

- 1. I see THREE THINGS we can learn from the example of Abraham's great faith.
 - a. First, God may someday ask us to release our grip on those things we hold onto so tightly.

- (1). The dearer those things to us, the more painful it will be to release our grip.
 - (2). And they may not be THINGS – they MAY be PEOPLE: such as a husband, a wife, a child, a parent, a brother or sister, or even a dear friend.
 - (3). God may ask us to release our grip.
- b. Second, whatever we release to God, He will replace with something better.
- (1). It may not be as rapid as in Abraham's case, but it will come.
 - (2). Not only did God give Abraham his son back, God provided Abraham with the blessing of his descendants becoming a great nation.
- c. And finally, whenever God replaces, He rewards.
- (1). God brings into our lives more blessings than can be numbered.
 - (2). **Psalms 40:1-5** – I waited patiently for the LORD; and He inclined to me, and heard my cry. He also brought me up out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my steps. He has put a new song in my mouth — Praise to our God; many will see it and fear, and will trust in the LORD. Blessed is that man

who makes the LORD his trust, and does not respect the proud, nor such as turn aside to lies. Many, O LORD my God, are Your wonderful works which You have done; and Your thoughts toward us cannot be recounted to You in order; if I would declare and speak of them, they are more than can be numbered.

CONCLUSION:

I. Years ago, an anonymous author pinned these words:

*One by one, God took from me all the things I valued most,
till I was empty handed.*

Every glittering toy was lost.

*I walked earth's highways, grieving in my rags, in poverty.
Until I heard His voice, inviting, "Lift those empty hands to ME!"*

*So, I turned my hands toward heaven,
and He filled them with a store of His own transcendent riches,
till they could contain no more.*

*And, at last, I comprehended, with my own small mind,
that God could not pour His riches into hands already full.*

- II. Now do you see how Abraham was justified by his works of faithful obedience?
 - A. Only a REAL, GENUINE, AUTHENTIC faith could pass THAT kind of test.
 - 1. James says, "...he was called the friend of God." **(James 2:23)**
 - 2. Do you know WHY he was called the friend of God? The answer is because, "*Abraham believed God.*"
 - 3. And Abraham DEMONSTRATED his belief in God through his daily walk WITH God.
 - B. Are you walking daily with God?
 - 1. That's the ONLY way you can truly be a FRIEND of God, AND it's the only way you will be able to truly BELIEVE in God when you encounter SIMILAR trials in your life.