

Suffering Abuse By Faith

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[0 : 00] And again, it's about Abraham. And Abraham is a very significant person, as you all know. I mean, he is what one person describes as the second father of the human race. He's not a father in the same sense that Adam is viewed as a father by being the sort of progenitor of the human race, that from him we are all derived.

But he's the second father in that he is the one through whom the people of God became the people of God because they were the children of Abraham.

Remember when, but there came a point when Jesus said to the children of Abraham, don't come and tell me that you're the children of Abraham.

[1 : 10] He said, I could make children of Abraham from these stones. That's not the basis of our inheritance from Abraham.

We are the children of Abraham because we share the faith of Abraham. So that the human race becomes one, not according to a common human father, but the human race becomes one by the exercise of a common faith in God.

So that I am your brother and you my sister or brother because of a common faith, which was taught to us by the father who is God.

So the father who is Abraham. And that's something that you sort of have to remember about this man. And you've got to remember, too, that Abraham lived a long time ago in a very distant world. But that it's the faith by which Abraham lived that becomes the source of life. Remember in John's Gospel when it says, As many as believed on him, that he has exercised this faith, to them gave he power to become the children of God.

[2 : 47] Not by the will of the flesh, nor by the will of man, but by faith in God. That's how we become the children of God, the children of Abraham, by the exercise of that faith.

That is the relationship in which we are, in which we come into relationship with God. So that, you know, when you get this sort of happy optimism of the human race saying, We are all the children of God.

It's only like saying, We're all leaves on the same tree. But that's not the children of God that are spoken of in Scripture.

The children of God in Scripture are eternal children of God by reason of a faith in an eternal God. And that's the thing we need to come to. That's what we have to recognize, who we are. So when it talks about Abraham, and it talks as it does in this chapter, in these verses today, about the sacrifice, the sort of supreme crisis in the life of Abraham, by which his faith was demonstrated, then you begin to know what it is that the faith of Abraham is meant to mean to all of us.

[4 : 22] Not that we should know about the faith of Abraham, but we should live by the faith of Abraham. It's to become not part of the dictionary of our minds, but part of the reality of our hearts, that we're living by that faith.

So having said all these things, let me just pray for one minute, and then we'll read. Our God and Father, as we consider the faith of Abraham, we remember Paul calling people little faiths.

We are very tiny in comparison, and our faith is almost insignificant to the point of a ridicule. And yet, you have called us to this faith.

As we study your word today, teach us this faith. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Now to read, we want to read from Hebrews 11, verses 17 to 22, which is the next paragraph in the sequence of the chapters.

And it reads as follows. Have you all got it in the red books or the green books or wherever it may be? By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, who had received the promises.

[5 : 56] And he who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son. Of whom it was said, through Isaac, shall your descendants be named.

He considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead. Hence, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff.

By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave direction concerning his burial.

Well, that's the reference in Hebrews to the faith of Abraham in offering up Isaac. Now I want to read you from the 22nd chapter of the book of Genesis, the story that it refers to, because I don't think you can go wrong by being reminded of this perhaps very familiar story by reading it again.

[7 : 20] It's Genesis chapter 22. For me, it's on page 17, but for you, it can't be far away from 17.

Can you find it there somewhere? Genesis chapter 22.

After these things, God tested Abraham and said to him, Abraham, and he said, Here am I. He said, Take your son, that is, the Lord said, Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains, of which I shall tell you.

So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him.

On the third day, Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place, if far off. Then Abraham said to his young man, Stay here with the ass.

[8 : 47] I and the lad will go yonder and worship and come again to you. And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son.

And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went, both of them, together. And Isaac said to his father, Abraham, my father.

And he said, Here am I, my son. Abraham said, Behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?

Abraham said, God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son. So they went, both of them, together.

When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar upon the wood.

[9 : 52] Then Abraham put forth his hand and took the knife to slay his son. The angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, Abraham, Abraham.

Abraham. And he said, Here am I. He said, Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me. Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place, the Lord will provide. As it is said to this day on the mount of the Lord, it shall be provided.

Well, that's a most dramatic story. And, just to try and put it in context again, you see, what it is, is it's in a sense, it's like Abraham and, it's like Cain and Abel coming to the place where they needed to make an offering to God.

[11 : 29] It's like, it's a strange kind of reality, but, but, you know, I know that, that a man has to, at some point, make an offering to God, you know, and what, and there he stands before the altar, and he needs to make this offering to God.

He needs somehow to establish a relationship with God. I, I was, I've told several people this, but I find it tickles my fancy so much that I want to tell you too about somebody in a very, actually, the bumper sticker on a very fancy sports car downtown, which says, the one who has the most toys when he dies wins.

I don't know whether you appreciate that, but I appreciate that. That, that was, in a sense, a totally cynical summary of this whole process. What is life all about?

And consistently through the scriptures, this is what life is all about. What happens when you stand before God? What do you do? And remember, we had the story of the faith of Cain and Abel and how Cain put there on the offering his sports car and thought that was very acceptable because it

was the thing that meant the most to him.

And, but then, what, what God demanded, Abel understood and by faith he offered the lamb and that offering from Abel was accepted by God.

[13 : 27] Here you have Abraham now coming before God and making an offering to God in accordance with the very specific command of God who told him that he was to offer up his son.

And it's a, it's a fascinating story because remember back in Genesis in the early chapters when, when the Lord comes looking for guard, for Adam in the garden in the cool of the day and says, Adam, where art thou?

And Adam is hiding himself from God. Well, when he comes looking for Abraham, Abraham says, here I am. And, he wants to come, he wants to be obedient to God and God says, go and take the son, Isaac, and, and you are to offer him up on a mountain in the land of Moriah.

Well, Abraham sets off on a three days journey with two servants and an ass and wood and fire and a knife and his son, Isaac.

And this is, in a sense, the journey of his life. And, in obedience to God, in the obedience which is by faith, because the story in Hebrews begins, by faith, Abraham, he went on this journey in utter obedience to God's will.

[15 : 03] Now, I don't know, I mean, it's, it's so impossible, isn't it, for us to conceive first that God would make such a demand, what kind of a God would do that, and then that any man would be willing to obey it, what kind of a person would be willing to do that.

And it's, it doesn't, it doesn't make any sense. From everything, every reason, and every, every sort of fiber of our being cries out that God cannot make such a demand on us, and if he does, we would be betraying ourselves to be obedient to that command.

Now, there's no, there's no, there's no other way of looking at it. I think you have to look at it that way. This was a favorite story of Soren Kierkegaard, and because he was a peculiar fellow, he delighted to rub our noses, as it were, in the fact of, how can a man be obedient to God when the God makes such a demand as this?

what is God thinking of? What is his purpose in it? And who is Abraham that he does it?

I mean, if you, if you look in the text in Hebrews 11, the, they tell you things about it. Just read it, if you look at it, by faith Abraham when he was tested, offered up Isaac.

[16 : 43] And, the thing is that, the implication is that he did it willingly, he did it obediently, he did it unquestioningly, he did it, I mean, it goes to the trouble of telling you the story, he rose up early in the morning to perform what must have been the saddest job that ever a man was called upon to do.

And he was on his way in obedience to God. Now, Kierkegaard says, if you believe in the possible, then you might well achieve the possible.

But if you believe in the impossible, what's going to happen? And he says that that's what Abraham did. He believed in the impossible.

He describes at some length how Abraham's whole life was a matter of obedience to God. He describes how, in the birth of Isaac, Abraham and Sarah overcame that ultimate enemy of man time, which is time.

You know how time grinds us down. Ultimately, time destroys us. The whole eroding process of time takes all the high idealisms of you and all the strength and vigor of our mature life and gradually it is eroded away and our bodies become impotent and powerless and finally enfeebled and all that process of time.

[18 : 34] In the midst of that process of time, Abraham did not lose faith. And they, Abraham and Sarah, the woman who gave birth to a child on her golden wedding anniversary, so to speak, that it was a battle of faith against time.

But you see, the significance of the battle is that faith ultimately proved stronger than time, that all the impact and the eroding power of time to all reduce us to nothing, all of that somehow is less powerful than the reality of faith.

I was mentioning recently the story of the bridge over the river Kwai. That's not what it was. The book is Through the Valley of the Kwai, which is related to the same part of the world at the same time in history, but it was the story of how the Japanese soldiers wanted to reduce the proud British soldiers to animals because of their famed discipline and their, you know, their, the famous story about the British Guards Regiment that in the middle of battle were told to stop and polish their

boots because they couldn't battle without their boots being polished because they were such a significant regiment.

The tremendous human pride, at least, that went into the regiments of British soldiers, which were so prominent throughout the world in the days of the British Empire, and in a sense the natural inclination that their conquerors should humble these proud men and reduce them to animals in captivity.

And they marched them through the valley of the quai, and in the most dehumanizing circumstances. They reduced them to where they were at enmity with each other, at enmity with their captors, at enmity with everybody.

[20 : 53] They just were totally degraded as human beings. things. And that happens. But you see what, that's what happened in the story, is that one man decided that another man who was put out of the camp in the tent where dying people were put to die, decided to nurse him back to life, even at the cost of his own food and at the cost of his own health.

What little bit there was of it? And that act of love and care and faith changed the whole story around, and it became totally infectious, and there was a kind of miracle of faith restored to these people.

And they were able to, well, by the end of it, they had a, it's an amazing story of how that happened. Well, you see, what happens with faith, what the writer to the Hebrews is trying to explain to you, through this illustration from the life of Abraham, that when the whole of life is utter, utterly, and completely impossible, when there is no, there is nothing left, still faith is there.

And that faith, which conquers time, which conquers the total impotence of man, which ultimately allows God to demonstrate his grace and his mercy and his eternal purpose, promise, that is there. And that's what Abraham's story is about. When he was tested, he offered up Isaac, who had received the promises, and that Isaac was the one who had been the child of promise.

[23 : 03] Isaac was the one who had been born born to Sarah long after she was past the age of childbearing, long after her biological clock had run out.

She bore this child, and this child was born to great rejoicing because this was the fulfillment of the promise of God, and this child grew, and there came a day when the God who had fulfilled his promise by giving them this child, said to Abraham, take Isaac your son, and go to the mountains of Moriah, and offer him up there as a sacrifice, and Abraham did it.

You see, the reason he did it, and the reason that I think that we need to understand this, is that while in a sense we live by the promises of God, at a deeper level, we live by faith in the God who promises.

You see the difference? If God promises you all that you could ever ask for in this life, and then seems to give it to you, you might very well take what he gives you and say, well, thank you very much, you've been very kind, but the God is that if he then takes it away from you, as he took it away from Job, and as he takes it away from Abraham, he is in effect saying to you, I want your faith to be in me, not in the things I have given you, not in the promises I have made to you.

I don't know how you can get your mind and heart around that in the circumstances of your own life, but we have to do that because God, it's our faith in God that is at the heart of it, not what he gives us, but in the God who gives it.

[25 : 13] And when the God who gave Isaac said, offer up Isaac, Abraham said, here's Isaac. I mean, he goes up the mountain, he builds the altar, he lays on the wood, he binds his son, he lays his son on the altar, and he lifts his knife.

Now, there's a peculiar kind of grammatical construction to this story in Hebrews, which suggests that as far as Abraham was concerned, the deed was done.

God had commanded it and he did it. And that's why the story goes on and says, he considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead.

Hence, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. The child who had been born to him in his old age, he gave to God in this sacrifice and God gave him back, figuratively it says, it says parabolically, God gave him back.

And in the story it says that, if you go back into the story in Genesis, it says that at that very point at which God gave him back, Abraham found a ram caught in a thicket and he took the ram and offered it instead.

[26 : 44] But God had provided an alternative. So you see, this strange little story, which comes in Genesis chapter 22 and which is again repeated for us here in Hebrews 11 or referred to here in

Hebrews 11, points to the central reality of our relationship to God.

And it's God was in Abraham in Christ offering his son. it's such a peculiarly poignant story because you won't experience death, your own death.

That won't be a particularly significant experience for you because you won't have much time to think about it afterwards anyway. But you will experience death in terms of somebody who you know.

That will be your most deeply personal experience of death in the whole of your life, will be in somebody who you know. And so that Abraham was the father experiencing death itself, not in his own death, which came in due process, but in the offering up of his son.

And this was the most poignant experience of his life. And somehow he chose to obey God. I, I, uh, you see, I think that it's so important that somehow we come to the place of Abraham where for us the most important thing is to obey God, is to submit to God's will for our life.

[28 : 55] It's not that we come to the point where God and I agree on what should be done, but to the place where I submit to what God wants done.

And, uh, that's what faith is, being able to submit to that. I, uh, somehow that's, that's what I think is at the heart of it all, is that submission at that point to what God wants done in our lives.

It's, uh, it's not an easy thing to do, I'm sure, and I don't know how to illustrate it to you, except that I, I think that if you explore your own heart and your own relationship to God and this, this thing here, that you understand that that's ultimately what is to men.

It's, it's what Job means when he says though he slay me, yet will I trust him. It's what Jesus means in the Garden of Gethsemane when he says, Father, take this cup from me, nevertheless, not my will, but thy will be done.

This is what faith means. It means faith in the purposes of God in our lives over and above everything else, that we trust him.

[30 : 33] We trust him in the most deeply personal and perhaps the most costly circumstances of human life.

I think all of us are brought to the place where we are asked, will you obey me? And we have to answer that question and say, yes or no.

We have to be brought to the place where unquestioningly we say, will you obey me?

And we respond to that question from God and say, yes, I will. I saw, and probably you saw, but I just want to share this with you again, the Mother Teresa film.

Do you remember that part where she said that she went out and she picked up this man off the street and took him in? And the smell was terrible and the disease was highly advanced and the condition of the man was utterly deplorable.

[31 : 52] And the poverty and the filth and the illness and everything about it. But she said, the reason I did it was not because he needed me, but because Jesus told me to.

I found that such a, such a, I don't know how to describe it, but it would just seem to me so terribly important that what our life is, is not responding to the need around us, which is in a sense futile because we can't do anything like it.

I mean, can you imagine setting off into Calcutta to look after the dead and dying, which are littered all over the streets? What a totally impossible task, because all you could do would be to give up in despair at the hopeless enormity of the task and to be one person setting out to change that.

But she said that the reason I did it was not because of the numbers of people dying in Calcutta, but because Jesus told me to do it. And what Abraham was able to do here in taking his son and offering him up was because God told him to do it.

He did this utterly impossible thing because God told him to do it. It would have been far easier if God told him, Abraham, go up and self-immolate, you know, destroy yourself.

[33 : 49] That would have been relatively simple. And it would have been a tragedy if Abraham went up and got to the point of doing it and said, I can't.

And he would have come home. And that place, Kierkegaard tells us, would have been marked as the place of Abraham's doubt, not the place of Abraham's faith.

But he went up and he did it. He did what God asked him to do, right to the point of raising the knife to strike into the body of his own son.

He did it, and in doing it, God met him in that point. And you see that the peculiar reality of it is, that in the cross of Christ you have exactly the same thing happening.

If you come in faith to the cross of Christ, you in a sense put yourself in the place where you acknowledge that what you deserve from God is death.

[35 : 17] He doesn't owe you anything. And if by faith you can come to the place which is the cross, where you are forced to acknowledge that God owes you nothing, it's there you will discover that he has given you everything.

That's hard for us. But it's exactly that which the story of Abraham's faith is meant to illustrate. And that is that coming to the place where he either believed God and obeyed him or turned away, he believed God and obeyed him.

And the children of Abraham are those who live by faith in God, that despite whatever circumstance comes into their life, no matter what happens, and I mean, Abraham was given this tremendous promise, and this promise was fulfilled in the birth of Isaac.

And then he says, offer up Isaac. No matter what happens, we are to say to God, yes, I want to obey you.

[37 : 02] We are, in effect, to obey him. And that's what the story is about. And there isn't any possible way of doing that except by faith.

There is no reason for it, there is no logic behind it, there is no human motivation to do that, except that you ultimately believe, that we ultimately believe in our lives that God is faithful.

And it's that verse in the passage, he considered God was able, that that's the place he came to. He made an instant when God gave him this, and when he came to the point of fulfillment of this obedience to God, he was convinced that God was able, even if he drove that knife home, to fulfill the promise which God had made.

He trusted God in that total and unconditional way. And it must have been a wonderful ride home back down from the land of Moriah, that three days journey home.

[38 : 29] A tremendous sense of rejoicing, a tremendous sense of God's faithfulness, a tremendous sense of worship. When we come up to the place in our own life and turn away and say no, that can't be anything but an invitation to despair in our lives, that despair will just move in on us like a gray fog and close in on our lives.

And if we can come to that and obey God, then we can't help but find cause to praise God for his faithfulness and consider that he is able to do what he's promised no matter what happens to us, no matter what circumstance overtakes us.

We just pray for a moment. Our God, you alone can teach us to utterly trust you, trust you with all that we are and all that we have and all whom we love, to trust you completely and unconditionally. No matter what valley you take us through, no matter what circumstance overcomes us, no matter what cost obedience may involve, we trust you.

And we want to be given what Abraham was given, and that is the strength to do what you command us to do.

[40 : 42] And there isn't strength for anything else, ultimately, except the strength which you and your grace give us as we set out to obey you in the circumstances of our life.

In Jesus' name, Amen.