

The Triumph of Faith



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 20:1–25:10.*

Memory Text: “Now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me” (*Genesis 22:12*).

In one of the greatest classics of Christian literature, *The Screwtape Letters*, British writer C. S. Lewis depicts a senior demon, Screwtape, who writes a number of letters to a junior demon, his nephew Wormwood. The letters are filled with advice on how to try to destroy the soul of a young man to whom Wormwood has been assigned.

In one section, Screwtape gives Wormwood the following advice regarding his charge: “Talk to him about ‘moderation in all things.’ If you can once get him to the point of thinking that ‘religion is all very well up to a point,’ you can feel quite happy about his soul. A moderated religion is as good for us as no religion at all—and more amusing.”—C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), p. 46.

What a powerful thought as we continue this week with Abraham, especially because among the things we cover is the story of him and Isaac on Mount Moriah, one of the most powerful and meaningful stories, not only in the life of Abraham but in all sacred history. Whatever his faults, whatever his failures, Abraham was a man of faith, a man whose religion was the foundation of all that he was, a man whose religion was, indeed, “very well up to a point”—the point being ready to sacrifice his son at God’s command.

Moderation in *all* things? Let’s take a look.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 2.*

Lying Through Silence *(Genesis 20)*

Soon after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham moved to a region near the border of Egypt, approximately eighty miles southwest from Hebron, before traveling north to Gerar, located in a fertile valley southeast of Gaza. The city-state of Gerar was then ruled by a Philistine named Abimelech.

Read Genesis 20. What does this tell us, again, about the humanity of even a great man of faith?

There are a number of fascinating elements in this story, one being the relationship between God and this so-called pagan ruler.

Read over the whole chapter again, focusing on Abimelech. What does this chapter tell us about this king's knowledge of the true God? What recent event might have gotten the king's attention regarding the reality of the true God?

Think how easily Abraham could justify his actions. If he were killed, the promise of a great nation coming from him would be lost, even though that promise alone—already given to him numerous times before—should have been more than enough to keep him from fear of a premature death (*Gen. 20:11*). Second, was he really lying? After all, Sarah was, as the chapter showed, his sister, or half sister. So, in one sense, by simply telling everyone “at every place whither we shall come” (*vs. 13*) that she was his sister, he wasn't lying . . . was he?

What we can learn from this is that deception can come just as easily by what you don't say. We can see here a great example of someone trying to stick to the letter of the law while missing the principle behind it entirely.

Someone once said that even “facts” come with interpretations and preconceived ideas. In what less-than-honest ways do you sometimes interpret the “facts”? Might you need to make something right in a case in which you, like Abraham, twisted the facts more by what you neglected to say than by what you actually said?

The Birth of Isaac

Finally, after so many years, so many disappointments, so many triumphs and failures, the child of the promise was born (*Gen. 21:1-3*). They named him Isaac, which means “he laughs,” serving as a reminder of Abraham’s laughter of disbelief (*Gen. 17:17*) when told by the Lord that he and Sarah would have a child. Indeed, with the exception of the one letter used in Hebrew for the word *and*, his name is spelled exactly as the Hebrew in Genesis 17:17 reads, “and he laughed.” No doubt, too, the name was also to signify the joy that he and his wife would have with the birth of the promised child.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t all joy and happiness in the home. What follows is a painful example of what it means to live with the consequences of sin, even after that sin has been forgiven.

Read Genesis 21:9-21. What sad events eventually followed the birth of Isaac? How did the Lord help ease Abraham’s pain at having to send his son away?

Ishmael had lived for about seventeen years with his father Abraham. How could Abraham send him away? What a sacrifice! What a price the old patriarch had to pay for a well-meaning error on his part! How ironic, too, that Sarah, who had first told him to go to Hagar, would be the one to tell him to send them away.

How did Paul describe the incompatibility between Abraham’s natural and spiritual descendants, and what application did the apostle make? *Gal. 4:28-31*.

Again, however difficult for us to understand how Abraham could have done it, what should be clear is that it never pays to distrust the Lord, that disobedience leads to pain and suffering, not just for the one who sins but oftentimes for those closest to the one who commits the sin. Certainly at the time that Abram first took Hagar as a wife, he never envisioned things coming to this.

What’s the next hard decision you have to make? Are you going to make a choice that will come with bad consequences you can’t even begin to imagine? How can you be sure that you are following God’s will in making your choice?

Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah

Read Genesis 22 prayerfully. What message, or messages, does the Word of God bring to you personally from this powerful story? What, if anything, can you take from it and apply to your own walk with the Lord?

Of the many Old Testament stories, this one is not only one of the most powerful, one of the most moving, and one of the most Messianic (in that we see the death of Jesus, God's Son, prefigured) but also one of the most difficult to understand. Even if we grasp that Abraham's need to display his faith (after so many repeated failures in that area), even when we understand his need to be willing to die to self and all that mattered to him—to be asked to do this by God? And to obey? Whatever else we can get from this story, it should show us all the paucity of our own faith and the realization that in the great controversy between good and evil we are dealing with issues that go far beyond what we, as sinners, can understand fully.

Danish author Søren Kierkegaard, commenting on this story, said that Abraham “left behind his worldly understanding, and he took along his faith.” What does that mean to you? How often, as a Christian, are you called to leave behind your worldly understanding and move only on faith? How are you supposed to do that?

And though in this story our focus is on Abraham, we mustn't forget Isaac's role too. Ellen White was so clear in *Patriarchs and Prophets* (p. 152) that though the young man could have fled, he submitted, even tried to help the pained and tormented old man do what he must. Isaac's ready submission typified the future submission of the Son of God. Once more in the region of Moriah, on a hill called Golgotha, a Father was to surrender His life in His Son. While Moses, looking forward by faith, wrote, “‘On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided’ ” (*Gen. 22:14, NIV*), we can exclaim in adoration and gratitude, “On the mountain of the Lord it has been provided.”

Faith and Works

Read Hebrews 11:17-19. Considering Abraham's previous distrust of God's promises, what insights do these texts add to our understanding of this incident?

However incredible the story of Abraham and Isaac, whatever lessons we can draw from it, it should be clear that faith, saving faith, the kind of faith talked about in the New Testament (*Rom. 3:28, 5:1, Gal. 3:24*) is not a mere assent to beliefs, no matter how correct those beliefs are. Many of the lost will be those who knew propositional truths about God, or who even did things in His name (*Matt. 7:22, 23*). However intense this example, it shows that faith means obeying God and that only a faith revealed in works is a saving faith.

Read James 2:17-26. What's the main message there? What point is he trying to make? What point is he not making? See also *Rom. 3:28; 5:1; Gal. 2:16, 17* to keep everything in proper balance.

Sure, we are saved by faith, but a faith that is expressed in actions, a faith that allows God to work through us. Notice what happened after the angel stopped Abraham. The "angel of the Lord" then called attention twice to Abraham's obedience as the reason for the blessings pronounced (*Gen. 22:16, 18*). Because Abraham had demonstrated that he was trusting and trustworthy, God was able to bless him. The point is that it's through an obedience generated out of faith that the Lord is able to bring upon us the blessings He has promised. Thus, faith and works are, really, inseparable in the life of a believer.

What exists in your life (if anything) that you might need to sacrifice, not to be justified before God but to show that you have already been justified by Him through faith in Christ?

The End of an Era *(Gen. 23:1–25:10)*

Abraham had returned to the land of Canaan and lived at Kiriath-arba, later known as Hebron. It was here that Sarah died. Despite her faults, Sarah was included among those whose faith looked forward to dwelling forever in a “better country” (*see Heb. 11:11-16*).

What does it say to us that Sarah should be listed, as she was, in Hebrews 11?

Three years after the death of Sarah, Abraham made preparations for the marriage of his son. Isaac trusted divine providence and his father to find a suitable wife. For him, the proper marriage of this son was of crucial importance.

Why did Abraham advise Eliezer to choose a wife from among his relatives rather than from the daughters of Canaan? Is not this being exclusive, or thinking yourself somehow superior to others? *See Gen. 24:3, 4; Deut. 7:3, 4; 1 Kings 11:4; 2 Cor. 6:14.*

After Abraham had appointed Isaac as his undisputed legal heir and had sent his other son away richly laden with gifts, he died at the age of 175 (*Gen. 25:1-8*). Ishmael and Isaac buried their father in the purchased tomb where Abraham had buried Sarah (*vss. 9, 10*).

Before proceeding with the line of the faithful, Genesis lists the generations of those who will fade from our view (*vss. 12-18*). The Bible is focused specifically on the line of Abraham, the line that would, however fitfully, keep alive the faith and knowledge of the true God.

Of everything that you’ve read about the life of Abraham, what’s the one point that strikes home the hardest? What’s the one lesson that, among all else, you have taken from this story that can help you in your walk with the Lord?

Further Study: Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 145–155, 171–176; *The SDA Bible Commentary*; comments on Genesis 20:1–25:18.

“The instruction given to Abraham touching the sacredness of the marriage relation was to be a lesson for all ages. It declares that the rights and happiness of this relation are to be carefully guarded, even at a great sacrifice. Sarah was the only true wife of Abraham. Her rights as a wife and mother no other person was entitled to share.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 147.

“At the appointed place they built the altar and laid the wood upon it. Then, with trembling voice, Abraham unfolded to his son the divine message. It was with terror and amazement that Isaac learned his fate, but he offered no resistance. He could have escaped his doom, had he chosen to do so; the grief-stricken old man, exhausted with the struggle of those three terrible days, could not have opposed the will of the vigorous youth. But Isaac had been trained from childhood to ready, trusting obedience, and as the purpose of God was opened before him, he yielded a willing submission. He was a sharer in Abraham’s faith, and he felt that he was honored in being called to give his life as an offering to God. He tenderly seeks to lighten the father’s grief, and encourages his nerveless hands to bind the cords that confine him to the altar.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 152.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ How might the “sacrifice” of Ishmael in the previous chapter have helped prepare Abraham for the sacrifices and trials that would come next? What principle can you find here that could help us understand what it means to live by faith?
- ❷ As a class, discuss the sacrifice of Isaac. How do we, in a modern context, understand this story? What lessons can we take from it for our lives today?
- ❸ What advice do you have for someone who, in the faith, is thinking of marrying outside the faith? What cautions might be in order?

A New Name

by JOHN K.

I grew up in a family that followed a major world religion. I knew nothing about Jesus. Then when I was twelve, my father began worshiping with a group that followed Christianity while it maintained the cultural ways of our family's religion. Father did not push us to join him. He wanted us to make our own choices about religion.

Father brought home religious books that I read, and I compared what they said about the Bible with our family's holy book. I wanted to decide for myself which religion held the truth about God. I found good ideas in our holy books, but the ideas did not seem to translate to the lives of the followers whom I knew.

But I noticed that Christians behaved differently. They seemed to practice what they taught. My father became more involved in this religious organization. Then the group's leader betrayed the members, and the group fell apart. Father eventually began attending a Christian church, and the rest of the family joined him—except for me. I continued to watch and wait to decide which religion was best.

Then my father met an Adventist pastor, and the two spent hours talking about God. My father was excited to find someone who believed totally in the Bible. When he learned what the Bible said about keeping God's Sabbath day holy, it matched something he had read in our holy book about the Sabbath, and he believed it was true. He was impressed that these Adventists observe the laws regarding clean and unclean foods. Surely these Adventist believers were true followers of the living God.

I became convinced that these Adventists worship God as true followers should. When my family decided to become Adventist Christians, I joined them, as well. We knew that we faced trouble from our families, but we felt God was leading us. With no other Adventists in our area, we worshiped alone in our home.

We all had names that reflected our former religion, so when we were baptized, we took Christian names. My new name is John. I want the world to know that I am a follower of Jesus. I am now studying in the Adventist university in my country, where I can learn more about being a true Christian. God is blessing me here in this school.

Our family searched for many years to find true faith. Now we have found God's truth, and we will stay.

Thank you for sharing God's love with me through your mission offerings.



JOHN K. is a pseudonym. He is a student in Bangladesh.