

September 20, 2020

"Altar-ed Living: Abraham"

[Genesis 22:1-19](#)

INTRODUCTION: As I said last week, God's ultimate goal for His children and His world is total transformation; that we would be changed . . . altered. Our transformation happens in many ways and in many places, but some of His most transformative work takes place as we encounter Him in personal and powerful ways AND in "Worship Settings." But "Worship" – it turns out – is not easily defined or neatly packaged and placed. Where and when (and how) God shows up isn't predictable. We can't control what God does, but we can be sure He will accomplish all that He has purposed in our lives, and in His Kingdom. He will ALTER us, especially as we encounter Him at the ALTAR; those holy places in which we have consciously been in and aware of His presence.

By the time we get to our passage in Genesis 22, God has been shaping Abraham's life for anywhere from 30-35 years after the initial calling from God (in Genesis 12). As He still does today, God was at work changing and transforming (altering/altar-ing) the lives of Abraham and Sarah – those He called to be His blessing and representatives throughout the whole earth. And remember how it is that God altar-s our lives? Is it all at once? Not typically. More often it is, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "from one degree of glory to another." (2 Corinthians 3:18)

[Review chapters 12, 15, 17 and 18 to highlight some of what has taken place: promises and commands given, actions taken (by God and Abraham).]

Read Genesis 22:1-19

Whether everything that happens in your life is a 'test' from God, I can't say; won't say; and probably shouldn't say. But I'm very willing to say God is free to do whatever He wants, including test us. Here in Genesis 22, God is testing Abraham; testing his faith.

And his faith has been growing. Abraham's life is being altar-ed one step at a time along the way. There have been moments of obedience (leaving his homeland, circumcision), some blunders (Sarai is my sister, difficulties with Lot), and some very difficult decisions (sending Hagar and Ishmael away). He's responded to the PROMISE of God in different ways and seems to have found his rhythm on several fronts. But the PROVISION hasn't come yet. Abraham is living between the PROMISE and the PROVISION. He believes it, but he doesn't see it. And that's always a place that tests our faith. Because, as the writer of Hebrews tells us, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (Hebrews 1:1)

Are you standing between the promise and the provision right now? Have you at some point? What does/did that feel like? It can be scary. We can feel out of control. The sense of so much

unknown can take away our initiative and energy. Our faith can dissipate. We can become angry that the promise isn't fulfilled yet. It can feel overwhelming. Maybe that's part of what so many of us are feeling right now.

It may feel like a test; and we all know how those make us feel. Here's what we know: the place where we are tested most often is between the PROMISE and the PROVISION, when we are both hoping and not yet seeing. And the farther along we are in the hoping – without any provision – the more difficult it is to have faith, and have any sense of a growing faith.

Abraham and Sarah were in between promise and provision (for a long time) . . . and then . . . the provision comes! And they are, what? Grateful, joy-filled (they name their baby boy Laughter), alert to God's faithfulness, experiencing a depth of faith themselves. And then, as someone said at Wednesday in the Word, it was time to go "Back to their regularly scheduled program/life."

The end of chapter 21 says that after Isaac was born Abraham and Sarah lived "many days in the land of the Philistines." (Genesis 21:34) We know that Isaac is old enough to carry the wood by the time we get to chapter 22. Is he 6-7, or 12-13? However long that period of time is, notice that Abraham and Sarah are no longer living between the promise and the provision. They are now living on the other side of the provision. And how do you think that is affecting their faith? How would you say your faith is changed/altar-ed once the provision has come and you no longer need to hope for what you can't see? Those places and seasons don't tend to grow our faith as much, do they?

Luckily God's promise to Abraham and Sarah is BIG enough – and His promises always are. Isaac's birth is only the beginning of the provision. There's got to be more coming, right? These "blessing all the families of the earth" and "stars in the sky and sand on the seashore" promises will never be fulfilled until Isaac grows up, gets married, has kids; LOTS of Kids!. So, in a way, Abraham and Sarah are still living in between the PROMISE and PROVISION.

Which is the perfect time for another "test."

"Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love . . . and offer him there as a burnt offering." (Genesis 22:1-2) Gulp! We're told that Abraham rose early in the morning and cut wood for the offering. Sarah certainly made them breakfast. Abraham certainly didn't bring anything up. Isaac was certainly glad to get to hang out with his dad. Because child sacrifice was a part of every other surrounding culture in the ANE, it's possible that the thought entered Sarah's mind as her husband cut and stacked the wood. Sarah also knew the promises of God and, surely, her faith would have chased the thought from her mind. Maybe she was oblivious, and wanted to remain in the dark. But, once again, Abraham left where he was, and headed out to a land God told him to go to. That, in and of itself, is transformational. He's altered another degree or two by simply rising and going. Even when we aren't 'feeling it' and our faith is faltering, there is value in simple obedience.

When Abraham could see his destination in the distance, he stops the two servants and gives us a window into how he sees all this: "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will WORSHIP, and then WE will come back to you." (Genesis 22:5) I love that Abraham sees this as an act of Worship! Anything we bring to and lay down before God, anything we offer to God in obedience and trust; that is worship. And those places, as we will see include ALTARS. The second thing I love about this verse is the pronoun "WE" connected to who Abraham believes will be "coming back." Is this more evidence that his faith was increasing during this test? Or is this a conscious move to keep Isaac in the dark? We may never know this side of heaven, but Hebrews 11 gives us a clue in a minute.

At this point, with the wood on his own back, Isaac asks a very honest question. 'Hey, dad, we've got the fire and wood, but where's the sacrificial lamb?' We don't know how long of a pause there was before the answer came, but there's never been a response that has rung more true through the ages: "God Himself will provide the lamb . . . my son." (Genesis 22:8)

When they get to the site God had in mind, Abraham builds a what? An ALTAR. Amazing things happen at the ALTAR; life-changing things. How long did it take Abraham to stack the stones? How obvious was it that he was dragging his feet? How far in the distance did he look for any sign of an animal fit for sacrifice as he worked?

And then the moment came; a moment we cannot even imagine, but one that people in the ANE could. "He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the ALTAR, on top of the wood." (Genesis 22:9)

How big are the tears welling up in Abraham's eyes? Isaac's? Did Isaac kick and scream? Did he decide not to question and simply resign himself to this ANE reality: 'I guess Jehovah IS just like the other gods'? We're focusing on Abraham, so let's stick to what he may have been feeling during this test of all tests. This is where Hebrews 11 helps again: "By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom he had been told, 'It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you.' He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead – and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back." (Hebrews 11:17-19) What an amazing, life-altering moment that must have been when Abraham hears his name again (God is such a personal God), is affirmed for his faith, and sees the ram!

This is a great moment at a life-changing altar. What a great story! And yet, so many outside the Church, and more than a few inside the Church, ask a really pointed question:

What kind of god would do such a thing?

Would ask this of someone?

Our answer is: the very God who commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son, his only son, whom he loved, would in fact do the very same thing Himself, with His Son, His only Son, whom He loved. But for the Beloved Son of God, there was no last-minute rescue; no 'just in time' substitute. No animal replacement. This was the costliest PROVISION ever.

And all who put their faith in this Lamb of God, the PROVISION for the PROMISE, will be tested again and again. He said, "Do you love me? Feed my sheep." He declared, "If anyone wants to come after me, he or she must deny him/herself daily, pick up the cross and follow Me." He said we had to "Give up mothers and fathers, land and houses . . ." or we weren't suited to be His disciples. He said we would have to "Go into all the world with this Good News" if we were going to bless all the families of the earth.

And you never know how belonging to God is going to play out; what kind of demands God will make on your life; what kind of tests will come your way; what decisions you'll have to make; what things you'll have to let go of, and what places God will send you to.

Do you find yourself in between the promise and the provision? Between faith and sight? In the middle of a test? Does it seem like what God promised a long time ago just isn't going to happen? Is your faith flagging?

I can't promise you the specific provision you need is on the near horizon. I can tell you that God wants to shape you during this 'in between' time. I can tell you that His work is often slow, "one degree of glory at a time."

Are you willing to wait (25-35 years) like Abraham and Sarah before you see the full provision?

For:

Reconciliation with someone important in your life?

Bouts of depression and battles with addictions to end?

Becoming and finding the right person?

An end to injustice?

The eradication of the global slavery pandemic?

Becoming a family that gets along?

The right job?

A cure for _____ (for you or loved one . . . or everyone)?

I can't promise that any of that will happen anytime soon. But I have seen it happen in people's lives, who keep getting up and going where God says to go and doing what God asks them to do. And I've seen it in my own life as well; one degree at a time. And it's all because . . . "God so loved the world, that He gave His Son, His only son, whom He loves . . ." (John 3:16)

Questions for Personal Reflection and Small Group Discussion

Same question as last week if you didn't answer it:

1. Where have you encountered God? Can you describe that place (altar)? What happened there? How were you changed because of it?
2. Can you think of a time you were in between promise and provision? Where were you at in your faith journey at the time and how did your faith grow in that in-between time?
3. What are some of the sacrifices God has asked/is asking you to make?
4. What do you think of when you hear the word worship? Does this story and Abraham's declaration that he and Isaac are going to worship lead to a fuller and more robust picture of worship? What act of worship can you enter into this week, apart from an official worship service?
5. Do you find yourself in between the promise and the provision? Between faith and sight? In the middle of a test? If so, how are you feeling and what steps do you need to take?
6. What does this passage have to say about being "Rooted in Jesus, Growing in His Love, [and] Branching Out to Serve Others"?