Abraham Tested

At the end of chapter 21, Abraham had matured in his relationship with God to the point that he displays some of the most admirable qualities of which humans are capable. God had prepared Abraham to respond to a severe test of his faith or rather a test of the *quality* of his faith. Abraham had been tested before on several occasions beginning with God’s command to leave is home and go to Canaan. While Abraham was a man of faith, we previously studied his lack of trust in God. While faith and trust are not the same, faith in God is required to trust God and trust could be a measuring stick of the quality of one’s faith. One writer likened it to measuring the purity of gold. Often the refining process of gold is used in the Bible to represent our growth as we experience trials.

The chapter begins with God calling to Abraham as he had done several times before. God’s previous calls to Abraham had been to announce his plans for Abraham and his descendants. This time, however, God’s message to Abraham is as brief as it is dreadful. God tells Abraham to kill his son. Verse 2 contains God’s instructions that provide us with some thought provoking information. God refers to Isaac as Abraham’s only son even though Ishmael was his other son. Abraham had to send Ishmael away so Isaac was the only son remaining in his life and God had told Abraham that it was through Isaac that his offspring would be blessed. Next we see the word love used for the first time in the Bible although the emotion surely existed long before Abraham. Lastly God tells Abraham that Isaac will be a sacrificial burnt offering and that provides our first clue regarding the symbolism of this chapter. Last week we noted several similarities between the births of Isaac and Jesus and now we see more similarities as Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac is symbolic of God’s sacrifice of Jesus. Note the following:

Just as Isaac was Abraham’s only son, Jesus is God’s only son.

Just as Abraham loved Isaac, God loves Jesus (Matt. 3:17, 17:5, John 5:20)

God tells Abraham to offer Isaac as a burnt offering sacrifice. Such sacrifices were made in the Old Testament to atone for sin just as Jesus atoned for our sins.

Next we see that Abraham traveled with Isaac and 2 servants for 3 days. For 3 days, Isaac was dead in Abraham’s mind and he no doubt was grieving at the thought of losing his son just as the disciples were grieving for 3 days after the crucifixion of Jesus. Just as Jesus arose on the 3rd day, Isaac was restored to Abraham on the 3rd day.

Isaac left the 2 servants behind to be alone with his father just as Jesus left his disciples behind to be alone with his father in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Isaac carried the wood to be used for the burnt offering just as Jesus carried his cross.

Finally we see the climax of this story as the angel of the Lord tells Abraham not to harm his son. At that moment Isaac represents us. Just as the ram is provided as a substitute sacrifice replacing Isaac, Jesus is our substitute sacrifice.

While we can only imagine what may have gone through Abraham’s mind as he prepared to take Isaac up the mountain, he was obedient to God and left without delay and apparently without telling Sarah what he was about to do. Hebrews 11:17 gives us some insight of how he reacted to God’s instructions. Abraham knew that God had promised that Isaac would be the father of many generations so that would only be possible if Isaac survived so he *trusted* that God could raise Isaac from the dead.

Reading this chapter reminds me of Steve’s message two weeks ago when he said that we need to offer God our best. He used the illustration of a church yard sale where we bring our broken down furniture for which we no longer have a use. We should be willing to offer something we would really like to keep. Abraham had large herds of livestock and was accustomed to making sacrifices to God. He would have certainly offered God his most prized animals for a sacrifice but God required his only son instead. Some speculate that Abraham’s love for Isaac had become worship and God tested Abraham to see if he loved Isaac more than he loved God. Abraham passed the test because he was willing to give God his best. Steve and I have both spoken about God’s desire that we give him our time, talent and treasure. We should give him the best we have to offer.

The chapter ends with a seemingly disconnected narrative about the birth of children to Abraham’s brother Nahor, however the significance is that Nahor’s granddaughter would become the wife of Isaac.