

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Lessons from the Lives of Old Testament Characters: Isaac

I have been spending a little time lately reading about the life story of Isaac as recorded in the Bible.

The first thing I noticed is how many writers in the Bible talk about Isaac. I found that he is referred to in 13 books in the Old Testament, and 8 books in the New Testament. In all, out of the 66 books that make up the Bible, 21 mention Isaac. There must be things about him that are lessons for us all.

God keeps His promises

The first lesson that came to me is this. God keeps His promises. He is true to His word. He is absolutely reliable. He is consistent with everything He says about Himself. What drew this to my attention was the number of times God says, "I am the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob" (for examples see Exodus 3:6, Matthew 22:32, Acts 7:32). God had made promises to Abraham. He kept every one. The promises He made to Abraham were repeated to Isaac. Again, every one was kept. The promises given to Abraham and Isaac were made again to Jacob. Again, God kept His word.

Subsequently, time and again, God said to the nation of Israel, "I won't let you down. Trust Me. I kept My word with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in their day. I didn't let them down. I kept all My promises to them. Now it's your turn. Have faith. Trust Me. I won't let you down."

We who have trusted Jesus as our Lord and Saviour have all the promises of God coming to us in our day. The message to us from our God is basically the same. "Have faith. Whatever the circumstances, however big the problems, however grave the difficulties, however hard the knocks, trust Me. Have faith. I won't let you down."

Isaac himself was born as the answer to one of the promises of God. Abraham's wife Sarah was well past the normal age for child bearing and she still had no children. Abraham and Sarah were, understandably, very sad about this. Then, one day, God said to Abraham; "Don't worry. Trust Me. I will honour your faith. Your wife Sarah will have a son. You must call his name Isaac. I have already promised you that your descendants will be a great nation. That promise will be fulfilled through Isaac your son. Trust Me. I've said it. I will do it. I will keep My word." And, in due course of time, so He did. Genesis 15:1-6, 17:15-19 and 21:1-8 record the details. The very existence of Isaac as a person is a reminder that God keeps every promise He makes to those who trust Him.

Unique love

Apart from being a witness to the truth that God always keeps His word, Isaac is a picture of an even greater truth. God's love for His Son Jesus is absolutely unique. Abraham had more than one son. He only had one Isaac. His love for Isaac was so special that a special term, only begotten, dearly beloved, is used of Abraham's love for his son Isaac which isn't used of Abraham's love for anyone else. This is a picture of the special, even unique love between God the Father and God the Son, which is underlined by the use of the same term, only begotten, five times over in the New Testament, referring to the Lord Jesus as the Beloved Son of the Father. How gracious God is. He gives us little glimpses in the Old Testament of important things which are taught more fully and more clearly in the New Testament.

Isaac - a picture of the Lord Jesus Christ

Of course, it was not only in the enjoyment of that wonderful Father/Son relationship that Isaac is intended to be a picture of the Lord Jesus, the Son of God. We must consider one or two other things about Isaac which are also illustrations of things we need to learn about the Lord Jesus.

The sacrifice

The day came when God instructed Abraham to take his beloved son Isaac to the top of Mount Moriah and offer him as a sacrifice to God (see Genesis 22). Unquestioningly, Abraham set off. Just as unquestioningly, Isaac went with his father, and two of their servants, with all the materials they would need for a burnt offering, as instructed by God.

When they arrived near the spot where the sacrifice was to be offered, Abraham said to the servants, "You stay here. My son and I will go the rest of the way by ourselves. We will come back after we have finished." Note that. Abraham expected that, when he returned, he would be accompanied by Isaac.

When Abraham and Isaac arrived at the appointed place of sacrifice, Isaac said, "Father, I can see the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" "Don't worry, son," said Abraham. "God will provide a lamb for the burnt offering." Now, up to this point, all Abraham knew was that God had told him to offer Isaac, his dearly beloved son, as a sacrifice to God. Naturally speaking, we can imagine Abraham's mind being in a complete turmoil. God had said that all His promises to Abraham would be fulfilled in Isaac. Now, that same God was telling Abraham to take that son Isaac, kill him with his own hand, and offer him in place of the normal sacrificial lamb. What a test for the faith of Abraham! What a test, too, for the devotion of the loving son Isaac to his father Abraham! But God knew His man. Abraham could not understand it. He did not know how it would work out. But, if God knew His man, Abraham knew his God. Abraham trusted God. God had never let him down. He never would. We are told in the New Testament, the Epistle to the Romans, 4:20 and 21, "Abraham staggered not at the promises of God through unbelief, but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; And, being fully persuaded that, what God had promised, God was able also to perform."

Genesis 22:9 picks up the story at that point. "They came to the place which God had told Abraham of; and 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. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son." There you are. Total faith in God. Now, faith in God is honoured. But before it is honoured it may well be tested to the full.

Remember the story in the book of Daniel 3. Nebuchadnezzar was about to cast Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego into the fiery furnace. Those three faithful men said to the King, "Our God Whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us out of thine hand, O King. But if not, be it known unto thee, O King, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up" (verses 17 and 18). What faith they showed! "Our God is able to deliver us ... but if not ..." They knew their God. He was able to deliver them. They trusted in Him. They left Him to choose what He would do. They knew that in the end what He would choose to do would be for the best. In the event, God did deliver them. Their trust in Him was that He would deliver them. They didn't know how the details would work out but they knew Him. Their trust was in Him. They were content to leave the matter entirely in His hands. They knew He wouldn't let them down. And, of course, He didn't. First, He tested their faith. Then He honoured it.

Mind you, they had on record the previous history of God's people who trusted in the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. And He was their God! As He had been with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, He would now be with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. They had on record the ultimate example of Abraham who so trusted his God as to be fully obedient to what God said to him.

In total, trusting obedience, Abraham took the knife and was about to slay his dearly beloved son Isaac. Having fully tested the faith and obedience of His servant, God now sent this message to Abraham. "That's enough. Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from Me." "And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son" (Genesis 22:12-13).

What does all this mean? Surely, it is a graphic illustration of what we learn in the Epistle to the Romans, 8:32, "God spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all." Except in this respect. Abraham was entirely willing to offer up Isaac, but God Himself intervened at the last minute and provided a suitable substitute. Isaac was spared. With the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ there could be no relief. He must go all the way. He could not be spared the suffering, the sorrow, the agony, the abandonment of Calvary. No substitute could be found to replace Him, the Perfect Substitute.

*"There was no other good enough
To pay the price of sin,
He only could unlock the gate
Of heaven, and let us in."*

"God spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all."

But that was not the end. In Hebrews 11:17-19 we read, "By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son. Of whom it was said, That in Isaac shall thy seed be called: Accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure."

There we have it. Abraham took Isaac up Mount Moriah, in faith, and in total obedience. In the faith of his soul he was prepared to go all the way, in total trust. We are justified in accepting from this scripture in Hebrews 11 that Abraham believed that his God was the Living God, the God of resurrection. So, then, the New Testament comment on this Old Testament history is that the offering up of Isaac and his coming down again from the mountain after the sacrifice was completed, is intended to be a compelling illustration of the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

A bride

The story moves on. The time comes for Isaac to be given a wife. We read in Genesis 24 that Abraham, the father, sent a specially trusted servant to take a long journey to seek out a wife suitable for his beloved son Isaac. The details are fascinating. The servant did his job well. He found Rebekah. She was willing to take the long journey to be presented as a bride to Isaac. No doubt the long journey gave ample opportunity for Rebekah to learn more and more about her future husband, even before she was presented to him face to face.

As we have considered, the offering up of Isaac is a picture of the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Just as clearly, the search for and acquisition of a suitable bride and wife for Isaac is a picture of the work of the Holy Spirit in this world seeking out and bringing to Christ those who shall compose the church, the consort and companion of the Lord Jesus Christ in His future day of glory. Listen to the words of Ephesians 5:25-27: "Christ loved the church, and gave Himself for it; That He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish."

What lovely pictures the Bible gives us. The first mention of love in the Bible is the love of a father for a son, that is, the love of Abraham for Isaac (Genesis 22:2). The second mention of love in the Bible is the love of a husband for his wife, the love of Isaac for his wife Rebekah (Genesis 24:67). The second love flowed from and took its character from the first.

In our day, it is our privilege to learn that the Father loves the Son. The gospel of John develops fully that lovely theme. Flowing from that sublime love and taking character from it, the Lord Jesus loved the church and gave Himself for it. Listen to the words of the Lord Jesus Christ to His disciples: "As the Father hath loved Me, so have I loved you" (John 15:9).

One more happy touch. In those days, most men had more than one wife, usually as many as they could afford to keep. As far as we can tell from the Bible record, Isaac had only one wife, Rebekah, whom he loved very dearly. He was entirely devoted to her and gave her his undivided love. Another grand picture, surely, of the pure, sweet, wonderful love of Christ for His church. One day, very soon, will come the day of presentation, when Christ will present to Himself His bride, the church for which He died.

Faithfulness

Finally, for her part Rebekah was entirely true to Isaac. She really appreciated his love for her and faithfulness to her. She returned it in full measure. What a lesson this gives us of the need to be true and faithful to the Lord Jesus while we wait for Him to come, to take us to be with Himself. As we read in 2 Corinthians 11:2, the Apostle Paul's constant concern for the Christian church was, "I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ." Surely Paul had learned well the major lessons embodied in the love between Abraham and Isaac, and between Isaac and Rebekah. Let us be prepared to learn the same lessons.

Let us pray.

O God our Father, we thank Thee for the lovely pictures in the Bible. Today, we thank Thee especially for the record of Thy love for Thine Only begotten Son Jesus, and His wonderful love for us. Help us to appreciate it more. Help us to be true to Him while we wait for His coming. We ask it in His precious Name. Amen

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