

***Relating In Faith:
Doing It Right, But...***

Genesis 22

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Regina didn't get it. In fact, it made her really angry. "How can you worship a God who wants a father to do something like that?" she asked, talking about Genesis 22.

Regina Wong had a desk near mine. And though she was interested in Christianity this chapter stuck in her throat.

I tried to pass along the stock answers. The ones that Abraham was given this as a test of his faith - to see his resolve of obedience. That God put it there to be a prophetic foretelling of Christ's sacrifice: the only son is the victim, that victim-son carrying his own wood, the sacrifice, life after the sacrifice.

But she didn't buy it.

She remained unsatisfied.

And, you know, I don't think I really blame her.

Of all the stories in Scripture, this one doesn't sit very comfortably with me, either. Here's the thing that really gets to me about it - Notice Abraham's response to God's command at the beginning of chapter 22.

"Abraham!"

"Yup?"

"Go kill and sacrifice your son."

[silence]

That's it.

That's all the exchange there is.

Nothing more.

I sort of visualize just a shrug of the shoulders, and off Abraham trots to do his task - right away the next morning.

Compare that to Abraham's response in chapter 18, where God drops in to say that he is off to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah.

Abraham leaps into action on behalf of the sons and daughters of the Sodomites. He goes out on a limb, wheeling and dealing with God the way we might do with a salesman, trying to secure a better offer.

Here is chapter 22 he's told to slit the throat of his own son. And.... **not a peep!**

Doesn't that seem strange to you?

Leonard Sweet is in Regina's corner on this chapter of Scripture.

[Last week I recommended his book, *Out Of The Question... Into The Mystery*. It's the basis of this Fall's morning sermon series. In it he tackles Genesis 22.]

He suggests this -

Verse 1 tells us that God comes to test Abraham. Most of us look at this as a test of obedience. And that is certainly a part of the deal.

But what if there was more?

What if, say, the obedience thing was like the "true/false" part of an exam? And what if there was a second part? You know, like the "essay" part of the same exam?

How might that change the way we read this part of God's Word?

(Sweet, p.46)

For that to make sense you have to read Genesis 22 in the broader sweep of Scripture. Which you are supposed to do, anyway.

There's a little Hebrew phrase at the beginning of this chapter. It's embedded in God's command to Abraham.

"*Lekh-Lekha*" says God. "*Get up and get going.*"

That's **exactly** the same word choice used when we first meet Abraham in Genesis 12 verse 1. "*Lekh-Lekha - Get up and get going.*"

The use of a unique phrase is a common device found in ancient literature to indicate two ends of one story.

Chapter 12 is the beginning of the story. God calls Abraham out from his people and takes him on a journey. It is an amazing journey, unlike anything ever witnessed anywhere before. It is a journey they take together. It is mind-blowing.

All of Abraham's neighbours live in fear of their idol gods. Their gods are remote. They are sinister. Their gods will squash you, given half a chance. They need to be appeased. Their gods give commands through their priests.

And here comes Yahweh. He comes directly to Abraham. He guides. He promises. He blesses. He rescues. He makes a deep, eternal, heart-to-heart commitment with Abraham that we know as **COVENANT**.

There is back and forth in that covenant. They eat together. They talk together. There are high moments. There is laughter. There is embarrassment and disappointment. There is rescue.

What you see in chapters 12 through 21 of Genesis is a living **RELATIONSHIP**.

It is the growth of a God-human relationship in full colour.

Then comes chapter 22.

The other end of that relationship development story.

And God is going to test that relationship.

The Hebrew word there is "*nisayon*."

A "*nisayon*" is a situation into which God puts a person to bring out parts of their personality that they might not be fully aware of.

Abraham is stretched to see the edges and contours of his relationship with God. It is like a cardiac "stress test" of that relationship.

A *nisayon*.

And so -

lekh-lekha : get up and get going, Abraham

Just like the call into relationship from 12:1.

AND -

will the response look the same in chapter 22 as it did in chapter 12? Will it have changed, grown, matured, after all the relational water which has gone under the proverbial bridge?

How **does** Abraham respond to God,

who is now his friend,

with whom he is now in sacred covenant?

At both ends you would expect Abraham to be obedient.

BUT

- and here's the real deal -
 might there be a **different** tone, a **different** texture
 to the obedience of chapter 22?

Instead of just wooden response and obedience, might we not expect to see a heart-felt, and fully-engaged obedience?

Seems to me that this would be the expected, anticipated and hoped-for outcome of this relational stress test.

What a stress-test it is!

Abraham is called to go against everything that this God-human relationship has stood for. He is asked to behave like his neighbours who lived in cowering fear of their idol gods, and would do anything to appease them, including burn their own children.

And what do we see?

Well, when it comes to the obedience side Abraham has it nailed. He obeys just fine. Gets an "A" on the test. And that "A" is commemorated in Hebrews 11:17-19.

But what about the other part of the test?

What about the relationship that God has been nurturing in chapters 12-21?

Sadly, it hasn't developed one whit.

Abraham is still at first base.

Abraham responds to the test like you'd expect a military cadet to respond in basic training. No talking back. Just, "**Yes, sir!**"

Which is NOT what you'd expect from someone in a living relationship.

You'd expect some questioning:

- *Lord, this is what the Canaanite gods ask of their people. You're not like them! Surely, this can't be!*

- *Lord, take my life instead, not the life of my son!*

- *Lord, I know you. You and I are friends. This doesn't seem like the same God of justice, righteousness, and compassion who covenanted with me.*

- *Lord, talk to me!*

(Sweet, p.52)

You'd expect that.

But nothing.

Abraham failed the second part of the test, the part that tested his relationship.

He was obedient.

But he wasn't living in relationship.

In fact, what you find after this *nisayon*, this test event, is relationship road kill.

Abraham and Isaac don't speak a word again. Abraham goes back to the young men, and lives in Beersheba. Isaac, it seems, doesn't return with them. And we never see them together again.

Abraham and Sarah separate. He goes to live in Beersheba. She, says chapter 23 verse 2, lives in Hebron. That's about 40 kilometres apart.

And what of that rich saga of conversation, of give and take, of relationship sharing between God and Abraham from the preceding chapters?

That, too, changes. Oh, God still speaks **TO** Abraham. But never again does he commune and converse **WITH** him. And there is a world of difference between the two!

And so, yes, like all sinners Abraham is still rescued and saved by Yahweh.

For salvation is for him, as much as for us, a free gift.

Thank our Covenant God for that!

And to Him, even with his relationship challenges,

even then

there is a gracious blessing granted in v.17.

But his legacy is limited.

In time a nation would grow up - a nation of Abraham's descendants as a people of the covenant.

And they are given a name.

Whose name is given to the people of God's covenant?

It is not Abraham's name.

They are not called the **Abrahamites**.

They are called the **Israelites**.

The name of Abraham's grandson, Jacob.

Jacob's name was changed to Israel.

Anyone remember when that name was changed?

It was 10 chapters later - Genesis 32, when Jacob **wrestles** with God.

He **wrestles** a blessing from God's angel, who gives him a new name, saying:

"You have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed."

And that name, the name of wrestling with God

Israel

that's the name given to God's covenant people.

The people of the covenant are the people of wrestling;

the people whose legacy is wrestling a blessing from God.

Not the people who just stare blankly back and say, "OK."

People of covenant wrestling, like Moses, who wrestles with God on behalf of the disobedient people of Israel in Exodus 32. They had rejected God in order to cavort with the golden calf. God desires to destroy them, and Moses, as it were, throws himself between them and yells, "*take me instead!*" actually stopping God in his tracks.

Covenant wrestling - Think of Luke 22, where, on the night before his crucifixion, Jesus wrestles in prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. His sweat turns to drops of blood, it is that intense.

We're not called to respond to God with blank stares and a quick "OK", but with heart-felt back and forth, living dialogue and relationship and

yes

when it doesn't make sense

real wrestling.

Fellow believers, the request at the beginning of Genesis 22 seems to be strange precisely because it **doesn't** make sense.

And Abraham flunks the test for his failure to challenge what God throws at him. He only gets the test half right.

There is a world of difference between
superficial obedience
and
substantive relationship.

Believers, our living, loving, saving Lord is calling us to an adventure of living with Him in faith.
He is inviting us into an adventure of substantive relationship.

That is the Christian faith.
That is the faith of the bible.
For that kind of a living, two-way relationship
to make *that* possible
Jesus came to earth as Saviour.

That's what it is all about.

As Leonard Sweet puts it:

- we're not called to live by some high standard of morality. That's being religious.
- We're not called to live the good life. That's being a capitalist.
- We're called to live the Godlife - a life in living, active, vibrant relationship with our

Creator and Redeemer. (Sweet, p.59)

And, yes, obedience is part of the picture.

But there is way, **way** more to the Godlife, to the wonder of a relationship with our Divine Creator,
who positions himself to us as **Heavenly Father**;
there is **WAY** more to that parent-child relationship
than just rigidly toeing the line.

And that's why, to echo what we talked about last Sunday evening, we read segments of the Psalms which throw challenges God's way:

God, wake up!
How long, o God?
Why have you abandoned me, God?
Do something, God!

There are times in our relationship with God when we, too, will wrestle.

We, too, will say, "How about it, God?"
We, too, will petition, will pound the doors of heaven
– as well as laughing and joking
– as well as sitting quiet and singing praises
– as well as walking in active obedience.

All of these are part of the covenant relationship into which God invites us, to which he calls us.

Abraham offers us the strong example of obedience. It was his great gift.
But his great blind spot was his inability to engage in relationship back and forth with God when it mattered most.

He missed the very deepest part of covenant,
the part found in living relationship.

Let me offer that to you today.

And encourage you to explore it. Here in worship. When you bow in prayer. And when you head out into a new week.