

Hey, do we have an abiding faith that God is fruitfully at work in everything we're doing? And are we obedient to God's Word and His voice, yeah, expecting by faith that we will experience the "best" results? Well, we can turn to the life of Abraham for some fascinating observations related to these questions.

For context, let's revisit some foundations from an earlier Whitestone episode titled *You Can Be Like Abraham*. Here's the thing: Abraham is a towering figure for Christians because we have strong parallels to and commonalities with Abraham. Here's a recap of nine of those commonalities. So. Like Abraham:

- We too know the good and the bad of humanity's history with God;
- We know, cultivate, and obey God's voice in our lives...indeed, Christians enjoy His very presence;
- We are each called by God to our vocations, often to different places and away from family;
- We are sustained by God's grace despite our disobedience...but earthly consequences still follow;
- We are invited to honor God in the afterglow of every victory...and every failure, too;
- We choose to respond to God by faith...and then joyfully bask in God's imputed righteousness(!);
- We were absent yet unfailingly remembered when eternal covenant was made on our behalf;
- We are unencumbered by the law of Moses—we are not under the law but under grace(!); and
- We will enjoy eternal, faith-grounded blessings as part of the family of God!

As we've said before, isn't all that very striking? Abraham is clearly one of the most remarkable God-followers in all of history. His name is on the lips of millions of people this very day, thousands of years after he lived! *But Christians not only have all the conditions to be like Abraham, we have even more!* I encourage you to review that episode by listening again or downloading a printed version for study.

Today, I'm going to go deeper into key facets of one of the most startling events in the Bible. That's because Abraham's conduct in that event and how God handled it all reveals how we can work to operate in faith very well. Yes, like Abraham, serious Christians choose to respond to God in faith. And Abraham's approach to the sacrifice of his son Isaac as directed by God is very instructive to us all. Let's take a look...

After many years waiting on having a promised son with his wife Sarah, God indeed blessed Abraham and Sarah with their son Isaac. But, as the Bible tells the entire story in Genesis 22, about 14 years later "God tested Abraham...He said, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.'"

So what was Abraham's response? Faithful obedience! You see, obedience is simply a key outworking of faith in God—even if that obedience may seem a bit incongruent or odd. And right off the bat here, we see the issue. Yes, Abraham knew the voice of the Lord just as Jesus said that "my sheep know my voice." *But to literally sacrifice your son as a burnt offering?* We continue with Abraham's obedience in the story...

"So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. Then Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.'" *Now, wait just a minute here!* Abraham said that he and Isaac would come again to the two young men accompanying them. So just why did Abraham expect that a *sacrificed* Isaac would return?

Well, the answer to that is revealed in the well-known "Hall of Faith" chapter in the New Testament book of Hebrews (11:17-19a ESV): "By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, 'Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.' He considered that God was able even to raise [Isaac] from the dead..."

Yes, Abraham apparently expected to sacrifice Isaac and then God would raise Isaac from the dead—and also that God’s resurrection of Isaac would be happening in time to return to the camp where the two young men were waiting on Abraham and Isaac to return! But we know that God substituted a ram for Isaac for the offering...and God’s test of Abraham was complete without the sacrifice of Isaac! Wow, Abraham had great faith! But Abraham’s *specific expectation* of God’s handling of it didn’t happen! Yes, God effected a different path...but, regardless, Abraham passed God’s test of faith with flying colors!

Consider this: Abraham’s faith *wasn’t* for God suspending His command to sacrifice Isaac—his faith was that God would raise Isaac from the dead...a God-action not yet recorded even once before in the Biblical narrative preceding the time of Abraham. Now *that’s* faith! And consider this even further: *God did do just that later with His own Son, Jesus!* Abraham truly grasped the character and mind of God! *Stunning...*

But isn’t this type of broad scenario just like key events in our own lives, where we often write our own scripts as to how we think God should best respond to our faith in Him...or should best answer our prayers? But apparently what God *really* wants is our faith in Him to be made more full! Still, we often can and do set ourselves up for spiritual or emotional letdowns when our contrived scripts fall by the wayside. And, yes, we can tend to have letdowns even when God’s response is far better than our contrivances!

But Abraham did respond amazingly well to God’s substitute of a ram for his son Isaac—yeah, he muted any temptation to self-satisfaction and directed his joy to crediting God for His provision! Yes, Abraham “called the name of that place, ‘The LORD will provide.’” Right, Abraham astutely completed the unfolding cycle of his faith-event by a declaration of a “name” remembrance that God’s approach was best...not his!

‘Course, faith in God and praying beg to be intertwined in our lives. And you know what? The companion event in God’s story that “bookends” the sacrifice in the Abraham-Isaac faith story happened two millennia or so later—when Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. Yes, with the Cross-event looming, Jesus the man prayed to his Father in heaven—yeah, praying in an ideal way: “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.” (Matthew 26:39)

Hey, we must consider that, in each and every situation we face, Jesus’s model of “nevertheless, your will be done, Father” is the very fullest expression of faith in God and His goodness for best addressing our circumstances. After all, Jesus’s subsequent, dramatic sacrifice on the Cross in fulfilling His Father’s will itself yielded and continues to yield utterly unique and incredible outcomes...for 2,000 years and counting!

Now we know that God’s ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:8-9). That’s partly because we can’t possibly have the full picture of nuances and consequences in every situation. But even if we do understand some of it, we are often tempted to act selfishly rather than responding to the testing at hand in full faith. Listen, each and every one of us is engaged in endeavors and projects that are complex and have many variables outside our control—like pandemics...interest rates...recessions...bad government...stiff competition!

But there is one thing we can “own” completely—our full faith in God and His goodness working on our behalf! And that brings Abraham back to mind! He knew God had been faithful to folks like Enoch and Noah. And God was faithful to Abraham and Sarah in fulfilling His promises when Sarah was well past child-bearing age. Romans 8:28 says that “...we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” Yeah, exactly...that’s for you and me!

So we can approach God in full faith and with prayer. But when we state our desired outcomes, our best approach is to relentlessly add this: “...nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will, Father!” The truth is, like Abraham, we should all want our unfilled expectations or requests to be supplanted by God’s very best answers! Hey, Abraham was *the man!* And many centuries later, we can be like Abraham: *full faith ahead!*

A&A: Application & Action

1. Think of some of the most amazing people in the Bible—Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, Esther, Paul, John. How many of them would be likely to say they had a path of easy, obvious prayers and direct, smooth answers? Still, how many would testify that their life-stories and endings were the best evidence of God’s grace-full response to their faith in Him? Discuss.

2. Have you found that some of the self-contrived answers that you have requested from God in the past were, in retrospect, rather shallow, perhaps even legitimately harmful...that perhaps your unfilled desires can sometimes be best left unanswered by God? Discuss.

3. What do you think about “...nevertheless, your will be done, Father” as the last word in all your prayers and petitions? Do you have the faith in God to trust activating these words and His related responses? Discuss.