

USAMPS Weekly Bible Study

08 February 2011

**“God Will Provide”**

(Please read Genesis 22)

Introduction:

Waiting on the Lord’s timing is difficult. In the process we gain endurance, determination, perseverance and trust in God, ourselves and others. Faith in God actually offers an ever increasing understanding of God’s will and purposes for our lives. Years earlier God had promised Abraham a son. God and Abraham are still in conversation with each other. God discloses Himself through the stories of His interactions with others. Those who do not stop at merely initiating a relationship with God, but press on further in faith; where are they going? (7) Abraham is a Christian patriarch, a man of great faith. He is someone we all aspire to be like. His story is full of struggle and expectancy. (16) Abraham did not know how this was all going to turn out though, but in the process enjoyed God’s progressive reaffirmation of His plan for Abraham.

**Who initiated the trial in this Scripture? (verse 1)**

God initiates this spiritual test. A spiritual trial is the situation when the single individual overstretches his limits. Was this a temptation? (James 1:13 and 1 Cor. 10:13)

Temptation - The word "temptation" is used in two different ways in *Fear and Trembling*. Earlier in the book, it is used synonymously with "test," denoting the ordeal God puts Abraham through. As the book progresses, it begins to be used to denote the draw of a lower stage of life upon a higher. Abraham is thus tempted by the ethical: he knows that he could choose at any moment to take the ethical rather than the religious path.

Test - In short, what God does to Abraham. A test is something God imposes upon people to test their faith. God demands a suspension of one's ethical assumptions and asks that his subjects act in complete faith and obedience to his guidance.

Soren Kierkegaard (pseudonymously Johannes, an 18<sup>th</sup> century Christian philosopher) suggests in his book *Fear and Trembling*<sup>1</sup> that first, Abraham was God-fearing: otherwise God would not have tested him. Second, Abraham loved Isaac, a love far greater than the usual love between father and son. Third, he would note that Abraham was free at every moment to change his mind and not sacrifice Isaac. Fourth, Johannes would remark that he himself is not a man of faith, and that though he can speak about Abraham, he could not possibly emulate him.

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<sup>1</sup> Kierkegaard, Soren, *Fear and Trembling*, Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983).

Jesus talks about pruning to bear fruit, so God regularly, though most carefully, takes us through testing times. Genesis 22:1 says, "God tested Abraham." The test is a careful arrangement of circumstances so that our faith can grow. Remember that the fruit we bear will be only as good as the plant itself. God is constantly upgrading the plant so that it bears better fruit.

Therefore, we become obedient to God for it is profitable for us. The limitations of our resources help us to understand our inability to always take care of ourselves. We resign ourselves to being led by his will. We persevere, moving forward in obedience to God not as a sudden impulse but as one informed by previous interaction with God's ability to sustain us.

### **What is the importance of Isaac being included in this trial? (vs. 2)**

Years later God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son. Are you serious? Isaac is the answer to Abraham's prayer. Some might say; "I am not sure if I really want to get really deep in relationship with God... I don't want him to expect this of me." God does not routinely put test people like he did Abraham. The test is to determine where Abraham has placed his hope and trust. If our relational universe is upon anyone or anything other than God we are out of bounds. Rightly ordered lives place God at the center of existence. "*A man's heart plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps.*"<sup>2</sup> With God at the center of the wheel, life is then able to move toward our designed purpose for existence; to worship God.

### **How long did Abraham need to process God's request before moving into action? (vs. 3)**

Abraham trusts God. The next day he gets up, tells Sarah that they are going to sacrifice, and leaves. Sarah does not question Abraham; since this is the most prominent place of worship Sarah presupposes that this must be really important. For the entire three days of the journey, Abraham is deep in prayer and contemplation. He knows what he has been told to do. Will he have the courage to follow through? Thinking and praying Abraham presses on in silence.

"Is there an absolute duty to God?" Every duty is a duty to God insofar as God is the divine is the universal. For instance, it may be my duty to love my neighbor, and this duty, as an ethical duty, is a duty to the universal and thus to God.

Johannes would say "yes" citing Luke 14:26 as teaching an absolute duty to God: "If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." This is hyperbolic language where an obvious exaggeration is imposed for a particular effect. Here Jesus works to establish an "*absolute duty*" to God.

The religious is associated in this writing with the knight of faith. He undergoes the double movement of infinite resignation (giving up all that he once held dear) and taking an illogical, irrational leap of faith into the absurd by which the knight regains everything he has previously lost. "*I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life*

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<sup>2</sup> Proverbs 16:9 (NKJV).

*which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.*<sup>3</sup> Kierkegaard divinely inspired suggests that humanity has something fundamentally non-rational about us. Let us say that we have a God-sized hole in our hearts that only he (God) can fill.

Possibly, Abraham did not tell Sarah what he was doing. (21) Who did he have to consul and counsel him? Why not Sarah? Sometimes you just have to carry the load yourself. There is always a danger in isolation. Seldom does God tell someone to do something completely original or alone. (exceptions: biblical wilderness experiences of Moses, Elijah and Jesus) We need to ask ourselves who we are telling our most intimate things in life to? If you are married and you are not telling your spouse these innermost thoughts, why not?

"Was it ethically defensible for Abraham to conceal his undertaking from Sarah, from Eliezer and from Isaac?" Hiddenness in this manner is not a result of the hero's ignorance, but is rather the hero's free act. Johannes tells of a man and woman who are in love, but the woman is being married off to another man, so they keep their love a secret. This hiddenness is a free act, making them responsible to aesthetics, which demands this hiddenness. Ethics, on the other hand, has no room for coincidence. It demands disclosure and is offended that they should cause a greater offense by keeping a secret (the two of them living a lie while; the would be husband continued on unaware). Relational integrity requires honest and open communication. Not that we are on a witness stand and must tell the "whole truth" about everything we experience. We should share all pertinent information and experiences with each other. We partner with one another. We are able to share the load carrying more than we would as an individual. We are sounding board to safely bounce all our good ideas off before they go public.

Abraham was silent with his intentions with his son. Think of the load he bore for the three day journey en route to the sacrificial location. The faith required of Abraham was not a simple matter to be had and then moved beyond. Abraham's faith had to be so strong that he would unquestioningly sacrifice his only son to God.

The mainstream position in Kierkegaard's day (and in our own) that there is no absolute duty to God is most convincingly put forward by Kant who argues that we can only be autonomous and responsible for our moral choices if we act not in obedience to some external law, but in accordance with laws that we freely will ourselves. I cannot rationally justify my actions by saying "God told me to," but only by saying that I acted of my own free will in accordance with a law that I should wish were universally applied. Kant, followed by Hegel, argues that all moral laws should be universal: for instance, it is never right to lie, regardless of the circumstances?

Johannes moves against this position in suggesting that there is an absolute duty to God; that is, that there are cases--for instance, Abraham's--where one should act in opposition to all universal ethical principles.

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<sup>3</sup> Galatians 2:20 (NKJV).

Soldiers may disobey an order if a contradictory order from a higher authority, or because the previous order is unlawful/unethical is received.

A Hegelian might identify God with the Absolute Mind, that is, as the embodiment of the universal truth. There is no private relation to God because we must forgo our privacy in order to come into contact with God: as a result, we can only speak of God in the third person. Johannes suggests that the knight of faith has an intimate relation to God.

Johannes argues that the knight of faith acts in total isolation from everyone else. He does not need validation from others besides God. Though it is noble for the single individual to aspire to the universal, God may call for actions that cannot be justified in the universal.

In acting as a knight of faith is constantly being tested. One is being asked act in unquestioning obedience to God. This temptation is far stronger than any temptation to pursue personal, unethical pleasures. The temptation in that case is to do what one knows is wrong; the temptation for the knight of faith is to do what he knows is right. He is constantly being tested, because the option to follow his moral judgment is always available to him.

This section of the text contains the only mention of "fear and trembling," an allusion to Philippians 2:12-13. The passage urges Christians to "continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling (the phrase behind the name for the book), for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." This "fear and trembling" seems appropriate for the constant testing that a knight of faith undergoes. The knight of faith must recognize that it is God who works in him, and that he cannot question or doubt. He must necessarily face this test with fear and trembling since he is going against the ethical and he knows that the option to retreat into the ethical is always open to him.

This "fear and trembling" is central enough to the message of the book that Kierkegaard chose it as a title. In an age when Hegel's universal is esteemed, in which the public, the outer, the open is valued, we lose a sense of the privacy and the anxiety with which one enters into a relationship with God.