

It was an extraordinarily hot day. The sweat was beading on the old and furrowed forehead of this man who was nearly one hundred and ten years old. Normally he would have a look of contentment on his face. He was a man who had lived through an awful lot and had a deep understanding of the way that God worked in this world.

It was simply that he understood how God operated in regard to prayer. He often remembered the time when he had actually negotiated with God and, believe it or not, he won. Sometimes he still shuddered at how courageous he had been, he was much younger then. Maybe he wouldn't do that now though in the current situation he wished that he could negotiate with God. Because what he was going through, just wasn't fair.

Today he saw a side to God that he didn't like at all. God had done a u-turn. God had told him in no uncertain terms to give up his most important dreams and aspirations. But the thing is that God was the one who had told him to have these dreams and aspirations in the first place—God had promised him the very things he was supposed to give up.

What dreams could a one hundred and ten year old man have that would be so hard to give up? The dream that he would have at least one child that would carry on the legacy of his existence. The dream that God would be faithful in his promises. The dream that righteousness would reap reward.

It was a long time ago that Abraham first remembered the promise that God had made to him. It must have been around thirty or forty years when God told him that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars. He remembered being a little amazed because for the fifty odd years he had been married to his wife Sarah they were unable to conceive. They had tried but to no avail and she had become the object of sarcastic remarks from within the household of servants. God repeated his promises and made Abraham perform little rituals that would make the covenant even more sacred and strong. But still, time wore on and there was no sign of children. How long must he wait?

That's the thing that Abraham couldn't understand. The promises were made but as time wore on they

seemed vacuous, empty words. His faith was tested for years and years and years. God made a promise that it looked like he wouldn't keep.

Abraham wasn't given any room to work out if it had been a conditional promise where as long as he complied to certain rules then it would be done. No, Abraham never had any conditions put on him that he hadn't fulfilled. He couldn't see why God made him wait . . . why God would toy with him.

On this sweltering day he looked at his son Isaac and his gut felt heavy. "Isaac," he said, "we have to go up that mountain and build an altar before God."

Isaac shrugged his shoulders in that teenage way: "OK."

His father looked back at him. There was a long pause as Abraham processed a multitude of thoughts. This was his only son.

Child sacrifice was common in his day. But Abraham always thought that it didn't make sense, it was abhorrent to give your own child on an altar to appease a god that was made out of a block of wood. And this is one of the really nice things about his God, the one true God. God valued life. He loved the life of the people he created, he didn't like the evil things they did, but that didn't change the fact that he loved them all dearly. And Abraham knew first hand what mercy God was capable of so when God asked him to sacrifice his son, Abraham felt ill.

Isaac was their only son. He was the one who was promised to them by God that would bring forth the nation as numerous as the stars. And it was a miracle that he was there at all. Isaac shouldn't have been born at all. Abraham was 100 and Sarah was 90. When men had come from God to tell them they would have a child, Sarah laughed. She thought they were out of their mind. She also did not have the faith that Abraham had. She was more pragmatic.

"Come on Abraham, what are you thinking? How do you think that we will see this come about? I can't have children. It just doesn't work. Face it Abraham, I'm not going to bear you a child. No, I won't listen to 'but God said' anymore. We obviously need to interpret what God

has said and make this happen ourselves. Here is our maidservant. Take her, and sleep with her so that she may bear you a child.”

Against his better judgement that is what Abraham did. He too had lost hope in the promise of God that they would have children. He too had lost hope so much that he reinterpreted the word of God to match his reality.

“I suppose that God never actually said that my son would be born to Sarah. Ok, then I will sleep with this maid servant and maybe my line will continue from her.”

It was one of the biggest mistakes of his life. The servant became pregnant instantly which just made Sarah look silly. It cast doubts in Abraham's mind about whether Sarah was really the right woman for him. Maybe he was supposed to have married someone else? Maybe God isn't as good at communicating as one would think? It was a fleeting thought but it truly affected their relationship. These things are never hidden well. Other thoughts too, how come God didn't see their relationship as worth blessing with children? What was wrong?

What a terrible time that was, as the household nearly ripped itself apart as the servants started to mock Sarah. So Sarah began to mistreat her maidservant so much so that the girl ran away with her son.

And Sarah hurt so much. Abraham hurt so much too. He knew in his heart that his interpretation of what God had said was incorrect. He had listened to the counsel of humans instead of God.

The dry wind flicked through his beard as Abraham stood there looking at his son Isaac and remembered that in spite of his mistakes God was faithful. The fact that Isaac existed just proved the mercy of God.

Three men had turned up one day, out of the blue and Abraham had made them welcome by killing the best calf and making bread from the best flour. One of them said to him, “you and your wife will have a son within the year.”

Think about that. It's like going into an old folks home and telling a centenarian couple that they will have a baby. Sarah cracked up. "Would everyone please give it a rest already. I stopped having periods years ago. I'm just too old. And to be honest, this whole message about me bearing a child is a little worn out." One of the men turned to Abraham and said, "I don't get it. How come she doesn't understand that anything is possible for God our creator? If he can make the universe, can he not allow her to conceive? If he can make a person out of dirt, can he not make her womb healthy? Just who does she think God is?"

Well, she certainly didn't think that God was going to do anything miraculous. She didn't think that God would do anything wonderful. God was distant, always had been, her faith lived in the shadow of someone else. And it wasn't enough for her. Why did she laugh? Because sometimes that's the only way we can cope with insensitive comments. Sometimes that's the only way we can keep our long time pain under control. And she hurt, because she was disappointed with God.

And can you blame her? Can you blame her when she realised that she wasn't menstruating anymore, when menopause had set in, can you blame her for thinking that this meant that God had failed to keep his word? She was 90 now. She shook her head in disbelief and chuckled. "these people don't believe in the same God that I do."

And then 3 months later, she was pregnant.

The heat of the desert shimmered the road in the distance. Abraham turned to his servants that had come on the 3 day journey. "Um, you guys stay here while me and my son go to worship. Yeah. Um, we will return later tonight."

His stomach sank on that word 'we'. He wasn't sure if he was lying or not. He wasn't sure if he said that so as not to cause alarm with his servants. He wasn't sure if he spoke the word in hope. He just wasn't sure. But one thing he was sure about. It hurt like hell.

As they started on the journey he flashed back to that day when Sarah had told Abraham that she had felt sick for a few weeks now. But she was saying it with a smile!

She was pregnant. And Abraham couldn't believe his ears, and he gave her a huge hug. And they cuddled and wept and laughed for hours. It was the happiest day of their lives. Better late than never.

And she gave birth to a little boy, whom they called Isaac which means "the one who laughs"—a constant reminder not only of her scepticism, but also God's faithfulness in spite of her lack of faith.

Isaac, one who laughs. Abraham now looked at his son and realised that there was a chance that these were the last hours of his son's life. How could God do this? Why this?

He gave Isaac the wood to carry. He strapped it around the young boy's shoulders. It was almost as though he was pre-empting the sacrifice. He saw vividly how his son would look when he lay him on the wood on the altar.

"Dad, you know how you said that we were going to make an offering to God, well, where's the lamb?"

It sent a shiver down Abraham's spine. How was he going to answer that? The truth was too terrible to tell. A lump stuck in Abraham's throat as he paused.

Isaac felt a bit uncomfortable with the length of the pause and stared intently at his troubled father's face. Something was bothering him because he noticed his father's eyes begin to glaze over with tears. He was also drawing deeper breaths than normal. Isaac began to ask another question but his father answered:

"Son, you have got to believe me when I say this. No matter what happens, God will provide a lamb." Isaac looked at his dad with that kind of twisted teenage 'what-a-weirdo' scrunched up face, shrugged his shoulders and said, "ok, dad, I believe you." Isaac saw for the first time just how old his dad really was. "I think he's having a senior moment," he thought to himself, "trust me to be the only kid in the neighbourhood to have a dad who is old enough to be my great great grandfather."

And they carried on walking.

Abraham began to argue with God, not in the way that let God answer, but just in an argumentative stream of statements that wouldn't let anyone have a word in edgeways. What are you doing God? What kind of sick joke is this? You give me a son after making me wait for

85 years, and now you are making me kill him. This child is all my dreams . . . no, in this child is all your dreams too, God! What were you meaning when you said that you would make a nation out of me? What did you mean when all you wanted to do was kill my son?

“I’m going to do it you know. I will go ahead with it . . .” and it was true because Abraham was so conflicted inside. On one hand he loved God and feared God so much that he knew that to disobey him would be a terrible thing. It would also compromise his entire existence. It would make him into a liar, why would he compromise his faith at this point in his life after so many years of faithful service? Why would he render years of belief useless?

Yet on the other hand, he was so angry with God for being so mean, so treacherous, so capricious. This god isn’t any different to the others. He wants me to sacrifice my child. I thought this God was good and loving, but it turns out that he can’t be trusted either—I might as well bow down to something that’s made of wood. I might as well just give in to the temptation to follow anything that might be tangible because God who I have devoted my life to is clearly not trustworthy after all. I tell you, if I’d have known it would come to this I would have lived life recklessly and unrighteously.

And here the lessons for us become abundantly clear. I’m convinced that without a trustworthy God that my life would be lived differently. I wouldn’t stand for anything because there wouldn’t be anything to stand for. I would become the most important person in my world, I would live in the lap of luxury, satisfying all my desires, and live with the hollowness of indulgence, because that would at least distract me from the emptiness of being.

What is the point of trying to be righteous, trying to die to self, trying to be Christ-centred, trying to love God and love my neighbour, if at the end of it all, it makes no difference, if in the end all of that is chasing the wind as much as the anything else?

And I really think that Abraham was at least in part feeling this disappointment. He wasn’t denying the existence of God, he wasn’t being an atheist, but he was

wrestling with the idea that God actually didn't seem to care after all, so why should he?

Wasn't 85 years of waiting for a son enough anguish? Wasn't that good enough as far as tests go? Don't we ask the same questions when we enter desert experiences in our faith? Don't we wonder why God won't just let us pass the test, and then let us live with his blessing?

Don't for a moment think we can compare with the moment of Abraham's reckoning. They reached the destination and he tied up his son, what do we think was going through Isaac's mind?

Do we think Isaac was living in faith that his father wouldn't go through with it? Do we think Isaac didn't put up a struggle? Do we think that Isaac didn't squirm to get out of this mess?

Think about it. You are lying there after being tied up by your father and he is wielding a knife over you in the name of God. How much faith would you need in God to lay still?

This is nuts. We often miss the magnitude of just how seriously this story borders on being psychotic. What would CYFS say?

You know how it is when we come across people who believe in prophecies that say their children don't need conventional medicine because God healed them by some miracle worker. The stories of the couple up north who let their child die before compromising their faith. Who here agreed with that?

This is one step further. An old man is about to cut the throat of his son as an act of worship and obedience. Then he will go home and tell his wife that he has done the right thing? And he will live happily ever after?

What is going on here? Dare we say that this man is an example of exemplary faith? Has tradition and Sunday school stories desensitised us to the sheer awfulness of this story?

It says right here that "Abraham reached out his hand and took his knife to kill his son."

No matter what happened next, no matter that the angel of lord stopped him before he struck his son, understand that his hand was poised above his son and he was one reflex away from killing him.

That is how important God was to Abraham. He was prepared to risk isolation from his future, his wife and his household. He was prepared to risk it all, not just his son, but everything he had, all his hopes and dreams about fathering a nation, all the preparation that he felt God had put him through with the waiting and the testing, all the value he had placed in being righteous, being fair, being wise, being God centred and God focussed his entire life, all of his ideas about religion, about justice, about family, about wealth, everything was on the line. Everything was about to disintegrate with one slice of his dagger through his son's throat.

Even though the angel stopped him, even though God provided a lamb for him to sacrifice, even though the story ends with a happy ending, even though all these things, the point is that Abraham was going to kill his son as an act of worship to God. Such was his dedication, such was his determination, such was his faith that he could do no other. And what better test for the father of Israel, God's chosen people?

How much did Abraham love God? Quite probably much more than we would ever know.

Now a normal lesson from this would be to say 'go and be prepared to sacrifice it all.' But I can't help but feel that this just doesn't do the text justice. The whole point of this story is that Abraham had reached a crisis point where everything was on the line.

How often does that happen to us with such extreme stakes? Well, I suspect that it does happen to us all the time, though we wouldn't admit that the stakes are as high. But there is a sense that we all come to points throughout the week or day where we have to make a stand for some ethic that is Jesus centred. We may be tempted not to make a stand in front of our friends or colleagues for fear of being ridiculed, or fired, or demoted, or just left alone.

It's not the big almighty and magnificent crisis point that we should be thinking about here. It's the little daily ones and we all know what they are. We face them all the time. And it's hard because we don't want to be on the outside of our social circles. But I'm thinking that unless I stand for something, I'll never stand for anything.

Abraham made a stand that said in no uncertain terms, God was first. Isaac may have resented him enormously for this stand, but he still knew that as far as Abraham was concerned, God was first. Sarah may have been absolutely gutted to hear the story, but she too knew that as far as Abraham was concerned, God was first.

The things we do are the things that reveal God's place in our lives, no matter how big or small, they all paint a picture of how we prioritise. Well, where is God on our list?

We are now entering a time of communion. Something we could think about here is the fact that God did sacrifice his son. God was in the same position as Abraham, and sacrificed Jesus for our sake to show how dedicated he is to us. You could say that God put us first in his priority list. He put us before himself and that is the staggering thing. That Jesus came to serve not be served . . . it's truly amazing and it's often missed.

Suddenly the cross takes on another meaning. God, the almighty, went through it for us. Sure there was resurrection, but let's not miss the significance of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross because that shows us where we fit on his list of priorities.