



## **BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: Ignite Your Faith: Genesis 12-25 wk. 4**

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**Message Title: By Faith We Live pt. 2**

**Release Date: Friday, 8/23/19**

Isaac was the Son of Promise and these must have been absolutely glorious days in the home of Abraham and Sarah. The long awaited Promise Seed had come. It would be through Isaac that the descendants would come. It's everything that they had waited for, for so long, by faith. God was pouring out his blessing upon them. It was everything that they had ever wanted.

Then one day God spoke and He asked for the most unimaginable thing. God comes along and says to Abraham, Abraham, I want you to take your son, your only son, the son whom you love, and I want you to offer him as a burnt sacrifice in an act of obedience to Me.

We can't even imagine what was going through Abraham's mind. It was a three-day journey and over those three days, Abraham had lots of time to think. Somewhere along the way, Abraham came to the conclusion that he believed he would have to literally slay his son, but that God would raise him from the dead and give him back to him. We know that, because the writer of Hebrews tells us that. Now Abraham didn't have the facts quite right, but he did understand that God had made a promise, and that promise would be fulfilled, because God tells the truth. Somehow, Isaac has to come out of this thing alive.

Abraham and Isaac finally get to the spot that God designated. He builds an altar. He places on top of it the wood and then he begins to bind the hands and feet of his beloved son. By this time, Abraham's heart must've been pounding through his chest as he pulled out that knife and he reached out to slay his beloved son, when God stops him. God stops him and says, Abraham, I know now that you fear Me, you reverence Me. You have not withheld your beloved son from Me. And there Abraham looks up and in the thicket he sees a ram and the ram becomes the substitutionary sacrifice on that altar. The place was called, the Lord Will Provide - Jehovah Jireh. It's really quite a remarkable story.

Just the emotional trauma of what he was asked to do, and how far that went, seems appalling to us. Hold that emotion right there, and then remember that about 2000 years later on that same spot, there would be another Father who loved his Son more than Abraham could have possibly loved Isaac, and He would lay His only Son on an altar. Only in that case, the execution would not be stopped. Rather, it would be completed, and there that Son would die and his blood would be shed. The substitutionary lamb would be placed on that altar, called "the cross", and there God, the Father, would see his Son, his beloved Son executed, to die on a cross as the substitutionary lamb for my sin.

In Genesis chapter 22 for the first time in the Bible, you have the word test. For the first time in the Bible, you have the word love. For the first time in the Bible, you have the word obedience. Test, Love, Obedience. That's the theology of this text-God testing our faith, by asking if we're willing to take that which we love most, and in an act of obedience, sacrifice it to God.

Well, then let me ask you a question. What would be your Isaac? What is it that you love more than anything else? Are you willing to put that on the altar and say, God, if you want it, you can have it?

For some of you, it would be your spouse. Are you willing to put your spouse on that altar and say, God, if you want him, if you want her, you can have her. For some it would be your children. Are you willing to put your children on that altar and say, God, if you want them, you can have them. For some of you, it might be your possessions, your bank accounts, your properties. Are you really able to say, God, take my properties, my bank accounts, my investments, everything that I have; I'm putting them on the altar. If you want to, you can have them. You can have them. For some, it would be your health. It's what you think about all the time. Are you willing to put your health on that altar and say, God, if you want it, you can have it. You can have it. For some of you that are single, maybe it's just your hope to have a partner. Are you willing to say, God, you can have that. You can have it. Maybe it's your hopes and dreams. Maybe it's your career. What is it? What is your Isaac?

You know, it's one thing to talk about faith, but let's be honest. This is very hard. As soon as I go through those things, it strikes a nerve, doesn't it? It's not easy to put Isaac on the altar. It's possible some of you are thinking, you know, this is easy for you. I mean, you just kind of float on a cloud all week and you glow in the dark, and you're just kind of pastoral. But we live in the real world. This is hard. I want you to know that this is one of the hardest things I have ever had to face in my life. I grew up in a home where my father was confined to a bed. I never saw him walk. I never threw a ball to him. He had rheumatoid arthritis and was crippled and gnarled. My dad was totally blind. I never got the chance to look my dad in the eye, but that wasn't the worst of it. The worst of it was every day was a day filled with excruciating pain. And I lived that way for 20 years, and it wasn't until later in life that I understood some of the ways that affected me.

When I got married and had my children, I could take almost everything that this life offers, and without hesitation, put it on the altar, but I could not put my family on that altar. I couldn't. For 20 years I had seen what God allows, and I did not trust him. I did not trust him. I, in my heart said, God, I have seen what you allow. I will not let you do that to my own family. I had endured it for 20 years. I could not go through it again, and I was unable to put them on that altar. But God in his gentleness just kept moving me down the path of faith, until I knew Him better. And there came a day when I was able to put Patti and the girls on the altar, and say from the deepest part of my heart, God, if you want them, you can have them. At that point, I finally believed God would not take advantage of me. God would not take advantage of my faith. He wouldn't turn around the next day and clobber them. I can tell you today without hesitation, that I can say I put Patti and the girls on the altar, and I don't have the slightest anxiety with that, but I also want you to know that was a long, difficult journey.

So let me ask you again, what is your Isaac? What is your Isaac? What is it that you're not sure you can trust God with? What is it that you need to put on that altar?

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Not only are there individual Isaacs, but there are corporate Isaacs. Not only do we take a journey of faith individually, but we take a journey of faith corporately.

God is doing significant things through this church. But with that has come significant growth and with that has come significant change. I know there's some that are waiting for the changes to be completed, because they're tired of change. I have to tell you, that's not going to happen. It's not a case where we're going to change and have arrived. It's going to be a way of life. With the pace of the culture and what God's doing in our midst, change is just going to be a way of life. That's part of what we have to accept.

But I also understand with change sometimes comes anxiety. Sometimes comes fear. And sometimes when there's anxiety and there's fear and there's insecurity, it creates a negative heart and when we have a negative heart, it becomes a critical spirit and that starts to be what comes out of our mouths.

And I'm not making these comments because I think we have a big problem. I'm making these comments because I don't want us to have a big problem. I can feel the anxiety level and I want us to remain focused and not go down the wrong path.

In a marriage, sometimes one partner starts to look at something negative in that partner and then pretty soon they notice something else, then something else, and pretty soon everything that person does bugs them. That will absolutely destroy that marriage. If that isn't corrected, that marriage will be destroyed. Same thing happens in a church. Sometimes because of anxiety, because of fear, because of insecurities, because of changes that are taking place, sometimes it produces a negative spirit, a critical spirit, and pretty soon you start to notice this. Then you start to notice that. I don't like that music, don't like that instrument, don't like this in the youth ministry, and pretty soon, that's just the path you're going down. That's a path of destruction.

Now I have to be careful to say, there have been those of you that have come to speak to us as leaders, to share your concerns, and I want you to know that's exactly what you should do. That's exactly what you should do. That's not what I'm talking about at all. I'm talking about the little critical comments that go on out in the hall, over a cup of coffee, over the dinner table at home, when you get together with some friends-critical comments that are made to people that have no power to make any changes, so it can't do any good. It can only cause division and it's wrong. It's sin. So here's the question:

Maybe this is our Isaac. Are you willing to trust God with His church? Do you believe that Jesus is the head of the church? Do you think God is powerful enough to lead His church? Do you believe that enough that you can get on your knees and place the church before God, and say, God, I trust you?

The reality is, we don't have time to be critical. We don't have time to pick at all this stuff, because your neighbors are dying and going to hell. That's what we need to be compassionate about. That's where we need to focus our energies. Yes, things are changing and yes, we have to continue to move ahead, but let's be about the mission of the church.

Do you realize how many believers in the world would give up everything they possess to experience what you just experienced one time in worship, but we get in a critical frame of mind and no longer do we even see that. So, do we trust God with the church? Can we put the church on the altar and say, God, I trust you and because I trust you, then I'm going to focus on the mission. I'm going to focus on my call and I'm going to focus on kingdom building. I'm going to get off a critical path. I'm going to celebrate what you're doing here.

Just one more thing. If you were to get on your knees before God and ask him to change something that you're concerned about in the church, and God would choose not to change that, would you be willing to consider that maybe it isn't the church that needs to change? Maybe it's your heart. Maybe it's your heart that needs to change. If you aren't willing to consider that, then you've got all kinds of problems, because that's just an act of faith. I've covered all kinds of ground, from the corporate Isaac to each of our individual Isaacs, whatever it might be. I don't know what your Isaac is, but I'm sure you do. I'm sure the Holy Spirit's done his job and you know exactly what your Isaac is. Are you willing to put it on the altar?

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Cara: Yesterday we spent quite a bit of time talking about giving up our personal Isaacs. Well today you gave us more of a church wide look at what we need to trust God for. We heard you challenging your church. So I guess I'm curious what their response was.

Bryan: Yeah, I would say the response was very good. I mean, I would say our people have a history of, if you presented from the Word, like not some topical thing I've made up, but it's flowing out of the text, just a wonderful response, a willingness to examine and change. I think part of the process is being really clear about what will never change, in order to look at what needs to change. I think a lot of times in churches we're just changing things and people are uncertain what's going to change next. So authority of scripture, you know, the Deity of Christ, the fundamentals that will never change, and defining those helps to look at things that do need to change.

Cara: What I liked about your message to your congregation was that, hey look, we don't have a problem yet, but we could.

Bryan: Right? I mean you have to keep changing to be effective.

Arnie: So how do you see people not trusting God within the church?

Bryan: Well not in our church. [Yes, of course!] But in somebody's church. [Of course] It shows up in things like control, politics, I think a hurtful communication, grumbling, backroom conversations. I think it shows up in things like an unwillingness to trust the next generation. And at some point, we were young, and God trusted us. Somebody trusted us. But I think when you don't trust God, then you don't let go of the controls. And there's a lot of churches that will die because of that.

Cara: What about like unmet expectations, where you think the church is just going to solve your problems? It's just people.

Bryan: Yeah. Unrealistic expectations. Yeah.

Cara: You challenged us saying that if what you're hoping and praying for isn't changing, that maybe it's really your heart that needs the change. How do we go about that?

Bryan: Yeah, so that's really helpful to think about. Maybe I don't have it right. And so you know, I like the prayer of the psalmist: "Search me oh God, know my heart. See if there's any hurtful way in me." You have to be authentic. There has to be humility there. There has to be an honest question of God, show me where I am in the way and what needs to change. But I think also in a real practical way, it's a refocusing on the mission. Like what is the mission of the church? It's not about being comfortable. It's not about this flavor of coffee. It's not about this color of paint. It's not about the style of me, it's not about any of that. It's, what is it? And that's what matters and how can we be effective at this? And then I think for each individual to wrestle with, well, what am I doing? Because oftentimes your complainers aren't doing anything but complaining. [Right.] So it's like roll up your sleeves, get in the trenches. You'll see a lot of things differently if you're actually involved and part of the solution, instead of just being part of the problem. So roll up your sleeves, get with it, and ask God to use you to help accomplish the mission. That solves a lot of that.

Cara: Are you saying that complaining is not a spiritual gift?

Bryan: Well, it's a gift some people have, I'm just not going to call it a spiritual gift.

Cara: Well, one thing I've learned not too long ago is, I was complaining about my daughter's dance, all the money I was spending, whatever, not seeing results. And then I see this huge production, this recital, and I was so proud of my daughter, and it was so beautiful. And I said to my friend, you know,

this is where I stop talking about things I really don't know anything about. And there's so much things in leadership in churches that are going on, that they don't have to reveal to you, and you just don't know what's going on. So ...

Bryan: I would also say as a pastor, we're all part of the problem.

Arnie: Well, and I think as you get older, you'll find out Cara, that you suffer with what I call complainaria. And that is you just complain. Nothing's ever good, [Right.] and as you get older, you just have to really watch yourself, because it's so easy to just not be a part of things and complain [Yeah, it is.], and, isn't it awful? [Yeah.]

Cara: Is that why you old guys just buy bigger cars and you act like everyone else is in your way?

Arnie: Yes. Drive right over.

Arnie: So, back again to the personal level, what are some indications that we're not trusting God as much as we'd like to think we are?

Bryan: So one of the conclusions I've reached over the years is I don't think we really believe a lot of what we say we believe. We get the lingo, we know what we're supposed to say, but our lives give evidence. I'm not sure we actually believe it. So you start looking at things like fear, anxiety, control, manipulation. Those are all evidences that we're not trusting God as much as we think we are. But biblically, I would say the number one measuring stick is what we do with our money. The primary thing with it biblically, that has to do with the money, is not budgets. It's not savings. It's not getting rid of debts, not all of that stuff. Not that that's bad. It's a very concrete measurement of how much I trust God. And that's a very consistent message. So I think people need to look at that. What do I do with my money? What do I do with my time, treasure, talent? And that helps me really wrestle with do I trust Him, or don't I trust Him?

The other question I think for people to wrestle with, is if God didn't show up. I sometimes use the language, if God overslept tomorrow morning, would I even know it? What difference would it make? What am I doing that's so far out beyond my own capacity, that if God slept in tomorrow I'm toast? And I think what happens over time is there isn't much of that. God could oversleep for weeks, and we, maybe, wouldn't even notice. And so I think we have to examine that. Where are we really out, on the edge, by faith, trusting God?

Cara: Right. Like with you and your dad. So often our struggles with God are tied back to painful experiences, that still do not make sense to us. It can make it hard for us to trust God now and in the future. So what do we do with that?

Bryan: Yeah. So, as you said, that's a big part of my own story. So I think you face it, acknowledge it. At some point you stop stuffing it and bring it out. You look at it, you wrestle with it. Part of what I had to come to grips with is I did have lots of questions with no answers, that were becoming more and more prominent in my thinking. And at the end of the day, I didn't get answers to those questions. So that's part of the faith walk, is I just make a choice in my will to believe God tells the truth. This is who He is. I choose to believe that. You know, I hear people say someday your questions will be answered, and it's like, you don't know that! And I have a long list of questions that I don't think will ever be answered. So you'll wrestle with questions like, how might those experiences have affected your view of God? Questions like, do you think God's a liar? I like that question, because it's really got an edge to it. [Yeah.] So this is what God said. Is He lying, or do you think He tells the truth? What did God promise and why am I questioning that promise? What is it I believe about God that caused me to think He won't keep his promise or that He's not telling the truth? You know, you have to kind of get to those kind of deep

questions and wrestle around with it to get through some of that stuff and move forward. It's not easy, but that is where the tension lies.

Cara: Boy that's a good question. I can ask myself that. Do you think God is a liar? Whew, that's good. [Yeah.]

Arnie: That's powerful.

Bryan: It's very practical.

Cara: Wow.

Arnie: So, what's the difference between total trust and then stopping everything because you're acting out in fear? Sometimes it's just hard to discern. Does that make sense?

Bryan: Yeah, it makes a lot of sense. So the faith question isn't an easy one. I think sometimes people can spiritualize reckless decisions and call it faith. Think about it in this sense, so is it faith to just keep moving forward and trust God to provide, or is it faith to make some adjustments and trust that God is redirecting the ship? I mean, how do you answer those questions? You can say a lot of things are faith. So you have the indwelling Holy Spirit, and a lot of times it's going to prayer and really trying to get a sense of what is God asking us to do. There's no easy answer to that question. I think you can spiritualize it and put your head down like a bulldog and keep going, and God better show up. Or sometimes that is what God wants, just like some of these Old Testament stories.

So when we launched our new auditorium that we're currently in, our giving was declining, the economy was in the tank. Everything would've said don't do it. As a matter of fact, the weekend we announced what we were doing, I had people in the hallway say, we think the elders have lost their minds! But these were spiritual men, and together we had a sense, God is saying, go. It's kind of like Children of Israel going into the Promised Land. It's like, yeah, there's giants in there, but God's saying, go. But God doesn't always say go. You know, sometimes we wish, like Abraham, He'd just talk to us, tell me what to do. [Yeah.] But that doesn't usually happen. So, I think after we pull together men who love Jesus and really want God's will and in prayer discern the answer to that question, and then go forward.

Arnie: So in the end, if we're holding back on trusting God, what we're hanging onto is fear then, isn't it?

Bryan: Yeah. I think at least it could be fear. I look at fear as a symptom; it could be fear, it could be doubt, it could be a messed up view of God. But I think the core issue in all of this is the issue of faith. What does God say, and does He tell the truth? So it's back to the question we just wrestled with. Do you think God's a liar, or do you think God tells the truth? If He tells the truth, what did He say and what would it mean to act on what He said?

Arnie: That's very helpful.