



## **Growing Strong in Faith – Giving God Glory**

### **Grace Reigns: God's Gospel for All Peoples Series # 30**

**Romans 4:19-25; Genesis 22-23, 25:1-11**

**David Sunday**

**November 22, 2015**

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Recently two brothers in Christ and I were talking about what God has been doing in our lives to transform us by His Spirit. As the two men shared their thoughts, they contained similar threads. The first brother said, “I am still trying to learn the simple lesson that Jesus is enough and to trust Him for my security and future—to believe He is all in all to me.” The second brother said, “If I were to describe the transforming work of God in my life in one word, it would be this: slow. It’s a slow work. It takes time.”

Sometimes we experience rapid, accelerated growth in the Christian life. When that happens in churches in a widespread way, we call those wonderful seasons “revivals.” We pray that God would grace us with times of accelerated growth. But ordinarily growth in faith is slow. Saplings don’t become mighty oaks overnight.

We’ve seen this in the life of Abraham. Going back and forth between Genesis and Romans, we’ve seen the parallels between these two books. We started with Abraham’s life in Romans 4 and then moved into Genesis. Before we go to Genesis today, I’d like to turn back to Romans 4 to see again what the Apostle Paul said about Abraham a couple thousand years after he lived.

I’d also like us to be encouraged by God’s final verdict on Abraham’s life. We can see how generous and gracious God is, and how pleased He is with the faith of His children when you and I trust Him. Let’s read Romans 4:19-25, paying special attention to what God says in verses 20 and 21:

<sup>19</sup> *[Abraham] did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb.*

<sup>20</sup> *No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but*

*he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God,<sup>21</sup> fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.<sup>22</sup> That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.”<sup>23</sup> But the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone,<sup>24</sup> but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord,<sup>25</sup> who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.*

Verses 20 and 21 have become a life prayer for me. Who wouldn't want to have these words written as an epitaph over their life? “He grew strong in faith, giving glory to God.” Wouldn't you want that on your tombstone? “He grew strong in faith—she grew strong in faith—giving glory to God.” For that to be the story of your life would be a wonderful thing.

As Abraham was going through his life journey—through all his ups and downs—I wonder if he felt he was growing stronger in his faith. I wonder if Abraham realized that his life was bringing glory to God, or if he was more aware of his own frailty and feebleness, his weakness and failure. But 2,000 years after his life ended, God's final verdict was this: “he grew strong in his faith, giving glory to God.”

Who doesn't want that said of them? We want to grow stronger in our faith. We want to give God glory. So let us look at three attributes of growing stronger in faith:

- 1) When do we grow strong in faith?
- 2) How do we grow strong in faith?
- 3) What is the effect of a life that has grown strong in faith?

## **1. When Do We Grow Strong in Faith?**

We are going to do this catechism style, using questions and answers. Question number one in the New Covenant Catechism: when do we grow strong in faith? Answer: most often in times of testing. Oswald Chambers said, “The very nature of faith is that it must be tried. Faith untried is only ideally real, but not actually real” (from Not Knowing Where). Faith has to be tested.

Going back to Abraham's life, we should think about all the tests Abraham faced on his journey. At the beginning he did not come from a believing family, but rather from a family of idol worshippers. But Yahweh appears to him and says, “Abram, go from your land, your kindred and your father's household and follow Me.” If Abram asks, “Where am I supposed to go?” God said, “I will show you. Just go, follow Me and I will make you a blessing. All the nations of the earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:1-3).

God promises Abram His presence, His protection, a place, a people and that his name would be great. Genesis 12 tells us that Abram obeys the Lord and goes as a great victory of faith. But by the end of chapter 12 we see that his faith is not yet fully mature. Because of a famine in the land he ends up in Egypt, and that's when he says to his wife Sarai, "You're a very beautiful woman. When they see you, they're going to kill me in order to get you. So tell them you're my sister, not my wife." This deception causes plagues to come upon Pharaoh's household and represents a failure of Abram's faith. So, a couple steps forward and a step back. But God keeps working with Abram.

In chapter 13 there's an incident with his nephew Lot, where they look at the land to the north, the south, the east and the west. Abram says to Lot, "You choose. You get your pick, and I'll take whatever you don't want." Abram takes the less fertile land, but he has God as his inheritance and is content with that. So that is a victory in faith.

Then in chapter 14 Lot—who has made a selfish choice and with the king of Sodom is now defeated—needs Abram to come to his rescue. Abram defeats the enemy nations and in the process becomes very rich and powerful. But the chapter ends with Abraham saying, "I will not take anything from the king of Sodom—only the most high King of Heaven will enrich me. I will find the Lord to be my inheritance." It's another victory of faith.

In chapter 15 God takes Abram outside at night and says, "Look at all the stars in the sky. So shall your offspring be." Genesis 15:6 is a key verse, "*[Abram] believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.*" So a victory of faith in chapter 15, but then comes chapter 16. Oh, what a disappointment!

Sarai, now an old woman, says to Abram, "We're not getting any younger. I don't know how God's going to bring about His promise. We're going to have to get involved and help Him along." So Sarai gives Abram her maidservant, Hagar, saying, "Have the promised child with Hagar." Ishmael is born and everything starts to fall apart. We are still feeling the repercussions of Abram's failure in faith in the world today. There is conflict because of what happened in Genesis 16. So that is not a good day. Up and down, up and down. Three steps forward. Two steps back. That's the story of Abram's life.

Twelve years later, after the incident with Hagar, God says, "I am God Almighty; walk before Me, and be blameless" (Genesis 17:1). "Abraham, I have not forgotten My covenant with you." God continues to reaffirm His promises to Abraham. Abraham is trusting the Lord and everything is going well—and then chapter 20. Oh, what a disappointment!

What happens in chapter 20? Abraham is wandering in a new area, and because he's afraid he again says to Sarah, "You remember that pact we made 25 years ago in Egypt? Well,

you're still a beautiful woman, and now this king is going to want you. So don't tell them you're my wife. Tell them you're my sister." In this way Abraham ruins his witness with Abimelech, and it's really a bad chapter.

Yet God is faithful. What happens in chapter 21? God gives the promised child. Isaac is born! As Sarah and Abraham hold this baby in their lap, they realize that miraculously in their old age a child has been born to them. Isaac's name means laughter, and they laugh with amazement at God's kindness to them.

At about this point we think, "All right. The days of testing are over. Finally Abraham has arrived. He's an old man now, he can rest easy. God has fulfilled His promise to him—no more tests. No more examinations." But we're wrong. Charles Spurgeon said something very wise.

"Beloved, expect your trials to multiply as you proceed toward heaven. Do not think that as you grow in grace your path will become smoother and the skies clearer. Quite the contrary. As God gives you greater skill as a soldier of the cross, He will send you on more difficult missions. As He more fully equips your ship to sail in storms, He will send you on longer voyages to more boisterous seas, so that you may honor Him and increase in bold confidence."  
(Beside Still Waters: Words of Comfort for the Soul)

Let Abraham's story warn us never to plan on a rest from trials this side of the grave. Never plan on resting. When does God normally grow our faith? Normally during times of testing. That's what happens in Genesis 22:1. "After these things..." All these things. Isaac, whom Abraham once bounced on his knee, is now grown and has become dear to his father's heart. They've lived together maybe 14, 15, 16 years.

*<sup>1</sup> After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I." <sup>2</sup> 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."*

God knows what He's asking from us. God never demands anything of us that is more precious to us than it is to Him. As precious as Isaac is to Abraham, he's even more precious to God. We read in 2 Chronicles 3:1 that Mt. Moriah was the very place where King Solomon built the house of the Lord in Jerusalem. We know that many, many centuries later, near that temple mount, there would be a hill the Romans would call Calvary. There another Father would walk His Son up that hill to be sacrificed. God knows what He's doing in Abraham's life in this test, but Abraham doesn't know it's a test. He does not know what God is doing.

## 2. How Do We Grow Strong in Faith?

That brings us to the second question this morning: how do we grow strong in faith?  
Answer: by trusting and obeying the God Who has promised to see to it. That's what Abraham is called to do in this chapter.

God has shown Abraham Who He is. *"I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward"* (Genesis 15:1, NKJV). "I am God Almighty," He says to Abraham. He's been faithful to Abraham all these years. So Abraham knows Who God is. God does not have to tell us what He's going to do or how He's going to get it done. We have to trust Who He is. That's what Abraham's going to be called to do. The task is severe, but Abraham's response is exemplary.

In Genesis 22:3, we see first of all that his response was prompt. *"So Abraham rose early in the morning."* He did not delay.

Secondly, his response was conscientious. He *"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."* He took everything that was needed for the mission.

We also see that his response was resolute. The destination was 45-50 miles away. It was a three-day journey. Steady determination was required. *"On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar"* (Genesis 22:4). So his obedience was not accomplished overnight. He had to keep plodding along, knowing all the while where he was heading.

Abraham was prompt, he was conscientious, he was resolute and his obedience and his response was solitary. Verse five, *"Then Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there.'" "Don't go with me. We're going up this mountain alone."* Perhaps Abraham was afraid that when he actually came to that point of sacrifice, his men would step in and prevent him from following through with his obedience. He said, "You've got to stay here. We've got to do this alone."

Prompt, conscientious, resolute, solitary—and his response was trusting. *"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.'" The verb "come again" is plural. "We will come again to you. We're going to go over there and worship, and we're going to come back."*

How's that going to happen? Abraham doesn't know how it's going to happen, but he believes all of God's promises are wrapped up in this boy, this child of promise. All the things God has promised for his future revolve around Isaac, and somehow—he cannot figure out how—God is going to be faithful to His promise. If you look at a book that lists the attributes of God, I

doubt you will find the attribute of perplexity in the book. But often a believer's experience of God involves perplexity.

We don't know how God's going to fulfill His Word and His promise. Abraham basically knows two things. 1) God is going to make a mighty nation out of Isaac, and 2) God is now demanding he give Isaac back as a sacrifice. When God said to Abraham, "Leave your father's house," He said, "Give Me your past." When God said, "Sacrifice your son," He said to Abraham, "Now give Me your future. Take the promise and give it back to Me. Return it to Me." Abraham doesn't know how Isaac is going to come back, but he knows he will.

Verses six and seven are sublime. Any parent can imagine the anguish that's going on in Abraham's heart as these conversations are taking place between him and his son.

*<sup>6</sup> And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. <sup>7</sup> And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here am I, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"*

Verse eight gives us the key to Abraham's trust. What is going through his mind as he made that three day journey? Abraham says, "God will provide for himself..." God will see to it Himself. "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.' So they went both of them together." Then verses nine and ten describe an obedience that is absolute:

*<sup>9</sup> When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. <sup>10</sup> Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son.*

How did he get there? Hebrews 11:17-18, "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.'" Here's how he did it. Verse 19, "He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back."

God, You will provide. You will see to it. Trusting Him with this is key to growing strong in faith. "Pro-vision." God sees ahead what we need and promises to not leave us destitute. He will take care of us.

The point of this story is not that God wants child sacrifice. It's precisely the opposite. God is not asking you and me, "Are you willing to give up your son or your daughter for Me?" No.

That's not what God is asking. In fact, quite the opposite. He's not like that idol god Molech who had his arms out wide, and there was a burning cauldron inside. The pagans would take their children and literally throw them into the fire to satisfy that pagan god. Abraham would have been familiar with those kinds of practices in his day.

God is saying, "That's not what I'm like, Abraham. I'm not a god who demands that you sacrifice your children. In fact, here's what I'm like. I am a God Who provides the sacrifice My children most desperately need." That's what He wants us to see through this story of Abraham and Isaac. "I am a God Who provides the sacrifice My children most desperately need."

We are entirely dependent on Him for the provision of every need, for the fulfillment of every promise. We see God's provision in verse 11. *"But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' And he said, 'Here am I.'"* What a relief to hear God's voice!

*<sup>12</sup> He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." <sup>13</sup> And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns.*

Unblemished, perfect sacrifice.

*And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. <sup>14</sup> So Abraham called the name of that place, "The Lord will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided."*

There's the key to this story:

On the mount of crucifixion,  
Fountains opened deep and wide;  
Through the floodgates of God's mercy  
Flowed a vast and gracious tide.

(From "Here Is Love," by William Reese)

This story is here to point us to a greater Father and a greater Son, Who one day walked up that same mountain called Calvary with the wood on His back. But when He was lifted up to die, and when the hand of God's wrath was coming down on Him, there was no voice from heaven saying, "Stop!" There was no ram caught in the thicket, for there was no other lamb, no other name, no other sacrifice, no other substitute that could pay the price of our sins. None but Jesus—none but Jesus could satisfy.

It pleased the Father to crush His Son, to deliver Him up for us all (Isaiah 53:10). He was delivered up for our transgressions, and He was raised for our justification, Paul says (Romans 4:25). What God wants us to see from this story is that if *“He...did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?”* (Romans 8:32). He provides everything we need.

This is how faith grows. It looks to the Lamb. It looks to the gospel. It looks to what God has provided in Christ. It says, “If God gave Jesus, I can trust Him for everything else. Jesus is enough. He met my most desperate need in Christ; surely I can trust Him now.” And the more faith feeds upon that gospel, the more it grows strong and brings glory to God.

There's nothing more important than that you reckon with the gift God has provided in Christ; that you come to terms with the fact that your sin was so great it required the blood of God's own Son to pay the price of your sin. But God in love for you gave His Son and did not hold Him back. He gave His very best for you, so that by believing on Jesus you might have everlasting life. Don't neglect, don't despise, don't ignore the wondrous gift of God's Son.

As we come to Thanksgiving and Christmas, I want you to know that God is unspeakably generous, unspeakably gracious and incredibly kind. He has given His very best—the Son of His love—for you. Believe in Jesus and you will have everlasting life. He took the place that you deserve. He paid the price for your sins. Faith grows strong by feeding on the gospel.

### **3. What is the Effect of a Lifetime that is Growing Strong in Faith?**

Our last question is this: what is the effect of a lifetime that is growing strong in faith? Answer: such a life brings glory to God. Abraham *“grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God”* (Romans 4:20). Faith glorifies God because faith causes me to look totally outside of myself and say, “God, I have to trust You to meet my every need. I don't have it in me. Everything I need is in You.”

After the great event of Isaac's sacrifice, Abraham's life goes back to normal. It's like Jesus with Peter, James and John when they are joined by Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration. They have that moment of glory, then they come down the mountain to a life that's full of death, darkness and destruction—the ordinary.

Abraham comes back down to the ordinary. God reaffirms His promises to Abraham in Genesis 22:15-18, something He has done over and over again. Then in verse 19 we read, *“So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba. And Abraham lived at Beersheba.”* Then we read of other babies being born to Abraham's brother

Nahor, and one of them—lo and behold—is Rebekah (verse 23). She is going to become the wife of Abraham's son Isaac in chapter 24. It's going to be a beautiful love story and marriage.

Then in chapter 23, another ordinary, painful event—Sarah dies. Abraham weeps—alone. You wonder who came to her funeral? Who paid her respect? She was the mother of all the faithful, but all we read about is Abraham going in to mourn for Sarah, weeping for her alone in Genesis 23:2. Then Abraham purchases a field owned by a man named Ephron. *“After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah east of Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan. The field and the cave that is in it were made over to Abraham as property for a burying place by the Hittites”* (Genesis 23:19-20).

What's the point of the Scripture telling this? A couple things. Ninety-nine percent of us are going to live most of our lives in obscurity, and not a whole lot of people are going to know a whole lot about us when it's all said and done. But if you're intent on bringing glory to God, that doesn't matter. What you care about is that God is praised by your life, that God is glorified in your life. Oswald Chambers said, “Remain true to God in your obscurity and remember you are not the designer of your destiny.” God is.

That's one thing we need to see from this. The other thing is that Abraham has been promised this whole great land—and all he really owns at the end of his life is a field with a cave in which to bury his wife. It's all he owns. His hope is not in this world. He's *“looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God”* (Hebrews 11:10). His gaze is fixed on heaven and the glory of God.

Let's look at one more passage in Genesis 25. Abraham lives a while longer after Sarah dies. He takes another wife and more children are born. Then we read in verses seven and eight: *“These are the days of the years of Abraham's life, 175 years. Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people.”*

Then verses 9-11 describe what is probably the only time Isaac and Ishmael are ever going to see each other again. *“Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, east of Mamre, the field that Abraham purchased from the Hittites. There Abraham was buried, with Sarah his wife. After the death of Abraham, God blessed Isaac his son...”* and the spotlight turns to him.

It makes me ask what if the real measure of a man's life is not how much money he has, nor how successful he's been in his career, nor how many people esteem him as influential or follow him as popular—or know anything about him? What if—when it's all said and done—it doesn't matter at all what the value of your home is or how talented you are or how athletic you are or how good looking you are? What if none of this counts much?

What if the real value of a man's life consists in how well he got to know his God in the few short days he had to live on this earth, how fully he yielded himself as a living sacrifice to the Lord, holy and acceptable to Him (Romans 12:1)? What if at the end the only thing that matters is what God has to say about how much that man trusted and obeyed Him? What if the only criterion that really matters is that you believed God, took Him at His Word and trusted Him—and He counts that to you as righteousness?

Faith pleases the Lord. Faith brings Him glory. The Puritan Richard Sibbes says this, "Keep faith and keep all. If faith be safe, all is safe." Let us strengthen faith and strengthen all. Weaken faith and we weaken all. Let's pray about growing strong in our faith and bringing glory to God. What has God shown you in His Word through the life of Abraham? What can you tell Him about your desire to grow strong in faith and to bring Him glory?

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