Abraham's Sacrifice (Part One): Faith Perfected

Works Complete, Mature, or Perfect Faith
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Any Bible student worth his salt knows that Scripture emphasizes sacrifice. The concept is introduced as early as Genesis 3, certainly by Genesis 4 with the sacrifice of Abel, and Cain's that was not accepted. One could even make a case that it appears in chapter 2 in the fact that sin causes death. And when you have sin present, it raises the question of how it can be expiated. So it is expiated by sacrifice through eventually, as we understand it, the blood of Christ.

Whenever its first mention occurs in the Bible, sacrifice crops up regularly until it becomes a major theme of the New Testament with Christ's supreme sacrifice for sin and all its ramifications and repercussions down today. And frankly, those ramifications will go down through eternity.

Now, somewhat apart from the theological issue of Christ's sacrifice is the Christian living aspect of sacrifice. You know that sacrifice is the essence of godly love. If you really want to love somebody, you do something for them without worrying how it affects yourself. That is the agape love variety. Paul points out this same thing to us in Romans 5:5-8, where he says that Christ died to pay for our sins while we were yet wallowing in them. Well, we still have the sins there. That is the ultimate example of God pouring out His love upon us. So that great sacrifice that Christ did for us showed us His love.

Now the pale human equivalent of self-sacrifice is so rare that we kind of stand in awe when somebody is willing to give up his life for someone else. We are basically in awe when somebody does that, let us say it is on the battlefield or somebody is on the street and somebody puts himself in front of a vehicle, or a bullet, or what have you. We just think that is an amazing thing that someone would sacrifice for another person.

God requires us in a spiritual way to be ready to perform those kinds of self-sacrificial acts both toward Him and toward other people. Does it not say
that we are to be living sacrifices throughout our Christian lives? But we do not like to make sacrifices. It is not in our nature to make sacrifices. It is a very rare thing when we do. Human nature is so self-centered, and the drive to preserve our lives and in some cases to preserve even our comforts, is one of the strongest drives we possess. And faced with danger that fight or flight mechanism kicks into high gear and rational or spiritual thought just disappears. It is gone. All we are thinking about is ourself and our self-preservation. So we react naturally. We react carnally. We react in a fleshly way rather than with high-minded altruism or godly love for others. We look out for number one just about every time some situation like that comes up.

That is why self-sacrifice is so rare and why it is so highly lauded when people hear about it. I mean, we give medals to people like that, posthumously a lot of times. And you know what? Our human nature kicks in in not so dire situations, too. If it is only to get a good seat on the bus or on the plane, we will not sacrifice an inch. Pregnant lady comes in. "Oh no, you're not getting my seat! I waited half an hour for this." That is how we are. Human nature rears its ugly head, and it is each man or woman for himself or herself. We do not want to give that other person—be it wife or child or what have you—that last piece of pie. We want it for ourselves.

How many times did you hear on the news about people running pell-mell for the toilet paper section of the local store to be able to get that last roll for themselves? And every Thanksgiving, you hear about all those people who crushed the little old ladies who want the 60" television but there is only four in the store, but oh well.

This is hard baked into us here in very wealthy America. We are probably less likely to sacrifice than even our recent forebears, like those who lived during the Great Depression or during the Second World War. We have been affluent for so long that we actually do not see a need to sacrifice. Why should we? There is always more. They will make more because that is how America runs. Make sure that supply equals the demand. So why should we wait? They will be able to get theirs. Just wait a little bit. But we do not want to wait. We want to be in the front of the line. That is just how we seem to be wired.
Even waiting a few hours sometimes or a few days to fulfill a desire strains some people's limits. They want it now and instantly, whether it is rice or a new car. Oh, just call Carvana and they will drive one up to you the next morning, or however it works. I cannot do that but from the commercials, it seems like it is an easy process. But people want everything now. Why sacrifice if you do not have a need to? Why put life and well being, or even satisfaction on the line if there is no need or advantage to the self?

Face it, we in the wealthy West live in an anti-sacrificial world. You know, we will not even sacrifice for our own good when it would do us a whole lot of good to get rid of something and we will not, or to switch over to something but we do not. Most people would rather take a pill or undergo surgery than change their lifestyle. We outright refuse to change. We make excuses, and we exempt ourselves somehow from all of this, and we take the quick fix rather than do what is better for us and change the lifestyle.

For instance, what me? eat less? change my diet? "No way," says the person who is 100 or more pounds overweight and whose health is spiraling down the sink, as it were. How about this, kind of reminiscent of the old cigarette commercial, "I'd rather fight than quit," says the old cigarette advertisement. And how many of those people who would rather fight than quit ended up dying of cancer? "Smoking marijuana won't hurt me," says every druggie ever, who cannot think straight because of what he is smoking. "Oh, I have a high tolerance for alcohol," says the drunk, who everybody knows is fooling himself. And so because we are self-centered, unwilling to make the sacrifices necessary for positive change, we slowly kill ourselves and make those we love suffer the consequences of our selfishness. Humans are wonderful, are we not?

But on the other hand, how great God's tolerance for us in our weaknesses. It is amazing that He puts up with us.

The Bible gives us many examples of self-sacrifice, and after the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the most spectacular one, at least in my mind, is the one that Abraham made—when God told him that he had to go up and sacrifice his son Isaac on Mount Moriah. If for nothing else, for no other action in his life, his sacrificial actions on Mount Moriah elevate him to
father of the faithful status at least as much as his belief that God would grant him a son in the first place.

I am going to be starting a series in this particular sermon in which will glean as much as we can from the account in Genesis 22 to show how Abraham did it, how Abraham was able to sacrifice his son as he did and what all that meant. Now, most of you know me at least a little bit. You know how I function in these series, so I have to give you a warning right now. We are not even going to get to Genesis 22 today, where it happens, because I have got to lay some groundwork so we understand just how magnificent his sacrifice is. We will get to the last verse of Genesis 21 and then in the next sermons, which I hope to give during the Days of Unleavened Bread, I am going to expand out on the sacrifice Abraham made of Isaac.

I want to get one thing out of the way very quickly because in some people who may hear this sermon down the line, this may come to mind. So I want to go to Matthew the ninth chapter, verse 13 because in this verse, Jesus said something that somebody might come up and say, Well, your premise is wrong about sacrifice. But I want to get this out of the way so we can deal with it. Here He is talking to the Pharisees and says,

Matthew 9:13 "But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.'

Here our Savior is saying He does not desire sacrifice. Obviously I have to explain why He actually does say and why this verse in particular does not mean what a lot of people think that it means. He says,

Matthew 9:13 "For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

So Jesus desires mercy and not sacrifice. He is quoting Hosea the sixth chapter, verse 6. Why do we not go back there? Because I want you to see the difference between the two of them. Jesus pulls out one phrase, and He uses it in His quotation there, but He actually says more in Hosea 6, or the prophet does here speaking for God.
Hosea 6:6 "For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings."

What we find here is that sacrifice parallels burnt offerings. So he is talking about ritualistic things, the animal sacrifices and the offerings, most of which were also the offering of an animal—animal sacrifice. What he is getting at here is he is talking about ritual observance, the rites and customs of the religion. He is not necessarily talking about the principle of sacrifice. He is talking about the various sacrifices and offerings that are being made. They are examples of all the ritual that was part of Judaism. Many of them, of course, started with things that God gave to Israel to do. But remember He is talking to the Pharisees here, and the Pharisees are well known to be sticklers about the religious part of it—the ritual part of it, the washing of hands and that sort of thing, only walking 3/5 of a mile or whatever it happened to be. All these little things that they added to the law as part of the customs of Judaism.

But before I go there, let us also talk about the word mercy here in the quotation, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice." That is kind of an inadequate translation because the word back in Hosea is *hesed* and it implies covenant loyalty, not what we necessarily think of as mercy. He is talking more about faithfulness, not necessarily mercy. Now that word *hesed* also means lovingkindness, and that is where they get the mercy idea. But in this case, He is talking more about faithfulness and the loyalty, because Jesus says He would rather have loyalty or faithfulness than all this ritual perfection. That is what He is talking about. He would rather have a people who are more loyal and faithful to Him than they are to making sure they cross every "t" and dot every "i" in the little minutia of the law. I am not saying He is doing away with those sort of things, but He says He would rather have the heart things of faithfulness and loyalty rather than that being perfect on the ritual side.

If you look at the word mercy as loyalty or faithfulness it makes a whole lot more sense than the other in connection with His next statement, where He says, "I did not call the righteous but sinners to repentance." The righteous in this case means those who do all these little minutia things right, and they prided themselves on it. They were very proud of that. But He says that is not what He is looking for necessarily. He is looking for a faithful, loyal
people to Him and His ways because that is the more important thing. The ritual things are less important. So His audience (let us put the audience back in here), Jesus tells the Pharisees who He is speaking to, that He prefers, not people like them who scrupulously observe all the ritual details, but those who truly repent and remain faithful and loyal to Him. That is what He is really looking for. He is looking for that change of heart, not people who could do exactly every detail of whatever the ritual happens to be and think of themselves righteous for doing that.

So His statement here in Matthew 9:13 no way implies that the day of sacrifice is over, which some people could get out of that, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice." I mean, just think, just a few pages down the road, He makes His own sacrifice for sin. Certainly the day of sacrifice was not over for Him! And as I mentioned earlier, when He calls us into His church, He tells us, "You be a living sacrifice." You give yourself every day so that you can be like Him, because that is what He did.

Let us go on from there because I just wanted to make sure that that initial seeming contradiction is dealt with so we can just move on from there.

Let us go forward in our Bibles to Hebrews the 11th chapter. This is the faith chapter. Now the writer of Hebrews here provides a very concise synopsis of the background of Abraham and Sarah's early converted life and what he does, obviously, this is a faith chapter, he emphasizes their faithfulness.

**Hebrews 11:8-12** By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God. By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born as many as the stars of the sky in multitude—innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore.
So we see here that Abraham and Sarah, along with Isaac and Jacob who are mentioned here, lived a life of faithfulness even during this whole time in their early converted life. This takes it up to the time of Isaac's birth. So from all the time that he was called out of Ur of the Chaldees up to the time when he was 100 years old, that is the time passage of about 25 years, Abraham showed his faithfulness by doing these particular things. Now, when God told him to go, he went. That is a very faithful, obedient thing to do. And he went even though he did not know where he was going. He just kind of started out, and God took him to the Land of Promise. Next he lived as a resident alien in a place that God had already promised to give him as an inheritance. That is kind of hard if you know that this is your inheritance and it is being withheld from you but God tells you to go live there without the rights of citizenship. That could cause some problems and it could easily make somebody jealous or envious of the other people. But Abraham did not. He waited patiently for God to give him his inheritance. So Isaac, the son of promise, was born and from him have descended all the billions of Israelites throughout history.

The whole point of this that I am trying to get across to you is that Abraham was faithful from the beginning. It just seemed to have been a part of his character that he always had. He was a very faithful man and Sarah was the same way. She conceived and carried and bore a child in her old age. I mean, think about it. She was 90 when Isaac was born. That took faith! He was as good as dead, she was as good as dead when it came to in terms of having a child. I would guess most women that age would be terrified of what she would have to go through over nine months and then in the bearing of the child. I mean, she would think, I am sure it would cross her mind many times, "I'm going to die in childbirth. I can't take this. My body just is not able, not elastic, not healthy enough to have this child, to give this child nourishment all through the time it is gestating." And then the birth. Wow! Could she even push the child out at 90 years old?

Do you understand now why it took faith for Sarah, as it says here, "She received strength to conceive seed and she bore a child when she was past the age." This is the interesting part, "because she judged Him faithful who had promised." She figured it out. She actually did a mind exercise that if God said that He would give her a son at age 90 that He would give her the strength to have that child. And she also, I am sure, figured that He would
also allow her to live past the birth so she could raise the kid. How much more strength that she would need after the kid was out. Children are rambunctious, and how many 90 year old women chase after babies and toddlers? I mean, that is a rare thing, but she had strength. She had faith that God would supply her need.

That is why she is the mother of the faithful, because she put all of this together and her conclusion was, God is faithful. He is going to give me everything I need to make this happen because He promised, and God does not renege on His promises. And so the promised son was born and raised, and many of us, all of us, whoever are Israelites, are alive. We have lives, and we can do all the things that God has in store for us.

Now, recall from my SPS that I said that Abraham's offering of his son Isaac was just as much a factor in making him the father of the faithful as his belief in God's promise to give him a son in the first place. Mainstream Christian theology highlights his belief in the promise of a son because the apostle Paul makes it a prominent part in his argument concerning justification by faith in Romans 4. That is where Paul brings up the fact that that he believed God and it was accounted for him as righteousness, and that is basically the jumping off point for Paul's argument on justification by faith. And so he argues from that scripture that I just quoted in Genesis 15. This is the promise about the son being born.

**Genesis 15:1-6** After these things [This is after the time he met with Melchizedek and gave Him his tithe.] the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward." But Abram said, "Lord God, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus." Then Abram said, "Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!" And behold, the word of the Lord came to him saying, "This one [meaning the one, Eliezer, who had been born in his house] shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir." Then he brought him outside and said, "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able
to number them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." [And here is the money scripture.] And he believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.

This is where Paul picks up in Romans the fourth chapter. Paul's whole argument about justification by faith hinges on verse 6. Abraham's righteousness at this point was not a work. It was not a deed. It was not an act. It was not a ritual of any kind. Abraham did nothing except believe. Abraham's righteousness was belief. It was trust in God, trust in the promise, faith that God would give what He had promised. And then God accounted that faith as righteousness. He credited him with righteousness because of his faith. It was not an act, not a work, but just belief. "God, You said You'll give me a son. Fine. I agree. I thank you. I believe." Now, this was when Abraham was 80 years old and Isaac was born when he was 100 years old. So it makes his belief even more incredible because he had to wait twenty years for the fulfillment of his faith. So it is an amazing thing that Abraham did.

Like Abraham, God imputes righteousness to us at the time of our conversion. He imputes righteousness to us because we believe in His Son. It is the same sort of thing. We have not done anything up to that point. But if we believe, He imputes that righteousness to us and it is credited to us because at that point we do not have the strength. We do not have the understanding. We do not have the ability to do any acts of righteousness really. All we can do is believe, and then He gives the strength through His Spirit later and we can begin to do acts of righteousness. But we believe on His Son, whose shed blood covers our sins, and that allows us to have a relationship with the Father.

All of that righteousness is imputed to us because of Christ. It is His righteousness that we take on, and we go through the veil, as it were, on the strength of Christ's righteousness. Not our own, because we do not have any yet. So it takes Christ's righteousness to bring us to the point where we can approach God and have a relationship with Him.
Let us now go to Romans 4 now that we have seen the background for Paul's argument. I am leading up to something. Do not think I have wandered too far from this idea but I want to show this part first so you can see this is the beginning of something.

**Romans 4:1-4** What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something of which to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt.

What he means here is that for a person who works, the wages are not a gift but his wages are what is owed to him. If you work, you are granted wages by the person who hired you. It is not a gift from the employer. It is something that he owes you because of the work you did. But he is saying here that it was not a work of Abraham that allowed him to be called righteous. It was simply imputed to him because he had faith. God recognized his faith and said, "I'm going to give you grace and you can then have the righteousness of Jesus Christ imputed to you so you can have a relationship with Me and then we will work on things."

Let us drop down to verse 16. We are going to read quite a bit here as he is getting towards his conclusion.

**Romans 4:16** Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, . . .

He is talking about people like the Jews who had learned the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is mostly talking about Gentiles here who had not been exposed to the law, and he is saying that this allows God's grace, allows both of these factions, if you will, to come into one as His church, as His Family.
Romans 4:16-25 . . . but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all (as it is written, "I have made you a father of many nations") in the presence of Him whom he believed—even God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did; who, contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he might be the father of many nations, according to what was spoken, "So shall your descendants be." And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about 100 years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb. He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised, He was able to perform. [This was the basis of his faith that God had spoken. He had given him a promise and that God could bring it to pass.] And therefore "it was accounted to him for righteousness." Now it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him, but also for us. It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification.

Romans 5:1-2 Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

This is Paul's argument about justification by faith. He says that what happened with Abraham, we can see the same pattern taking place in us. God does the exact same thing for us as He did for Abraham. The promises are basically the same. He is going to give us a future, that we have a promised Seed, as it were, who is going to be King in the Kingdom of God. We believe these things that He has said, and we are therefore given grace and brought near to God.

So Abraham had come to Canaan at 75 and several decades had passed. When Abraham sacrificed Isaac, he may have been as old as 130 years old, depending on how old Isaac was. There are different traditions about how
old Isaac was. Abraham was probably in the 125-130 range. But it fits. He still showed his faith for all that time.

Now we understand we are justified by faith, not by works. But most mainline churches do not emphasize Abraham's offering of Isaac as the necessary flipside of Paul's argument in Romans 4 and the start of verse 5. (Got to make sure I make this transition because we are transitioning into the main point of my sermon here.) They look at what Abraham did when God made him the promise to have a son and they stop. They do not see, or they just plain ignore the fact that Abraham, at 80 (remember I said he was 80 years old at that time) was justified by faith, but then he lived another 95 years. Did he not die at 175? What did he do all that time from 80 to 175? Should there not be something happening during all that time?

We know Protestant theology believes, essentially, once saved, always saved. They do not believe necessarily in works of any kind in terms of being part of our justification, because they do not understand or they refuse to see or they have been deceived. I do not know how it is with each individual, but they do not see that God requires something of us after that point. Now those who do see that God requires us to do something, they basically distill it down to you need to love one another, and that is a good step along the path. But it is not full, and they do not think it is necessarily required.

So what we have is that there is, after this justification by faith, a big blank spot in the theology. They do not recognize that there is a flip side of Abraham's justification by faith. And the illustration of that flip side is Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, however many years later that was.

So Paul, in Romans 4 and 5, speaks only of justification at the time of conversion, when our past sins are forgiven by God's grace, and they (Protestants) stop. They take that unmerited favor that we are given by God at that time, and they make it cover everything, and nothing needs more to be done. It is like, then you just exist until you die and you go to heaven, according to their theology. There is not a whole lot more.
What about our converted lives? What do we do after we are baptized and brought into the church of God? Well, Paul gets to this in the next chapter, in chapter 6, where he says,

**Romans 6:1-2** What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?

He gets to the to the point. We cannot lean on God's grace and make a mockery of it by continuing in sin. God is not going to accept that. He called us and gave us grace so that we could be converted. That is, so that we can change. Not that we can continue in our sin, but that we can do the works of righteousness and be like His Son. So what Paul says in chapter 6 as we go through it, (I am actually not going to read the scriptures), but when he gets down to about verse 18 he says we are to become slaves of righteousness; that we are now obligated because God redeemed us and owns us. We are obligated to grow in righteousness toward holiness towards sanctification.

Ah, sanctification. Now there is the word that most Protestant theologians think they know, but they do not know because they do not take the step. They do not make the connection that God requires something of us in order to be like Christ. We need to go through this process of sanctification, that we need to work toward holiness to put God's way of life into our character.

I am going to pick on Martin Luther here for a while. Martin Luther hated the epistle of James with a passion for this very reason. He called it an epistle of straw. If he had had the authority, he would have taken James right out of the canon because he did not like it at all. Luther was all for grace by faith alone, and he was very much against the works of God and keeping God's law. He adored Romans 4 and 5. He thought they were just the greatest thing because they held up his argument about justification by faith. And he was able to dance around in explaining Roman 6 because it does not mention the law or works. So he was able to use rhetoric to get around what Paul said there.

But James he could not dance around because James, through and through, emphasizes works. What do you do when you are in the church and you face
various situations? How do you react to people, whether it is in speech or whether a man who is a bum off the street comes into your fellowship, what do you do? It is all about the things that you do as as a converted person. And what did he do to emphasize or illustrate this particular point of the theology? He used the example of Abraham sacrificing Isaac.

So let us go to James 2 and see this. We are going to read verses 21-24. Right before this, in verse 20 as well as in verse 17, he had mentioned "faith without works is dead." Faith is great. Faith is wonderful, but it is incomplete. If it is just faith alone, he calls it dead. If there is no action that comes out of the faith, if there is no deed, then the faith dies on the vine, as it were. So, he says,

**James 2:21-24** Was not Abraham our father justified by works [That wording right there got Luther right in the gut.] when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? [He had the promise, he had faith, you had God telling him to sacrifice his son. You had the works that completed the faith. This is the point I am getting at here.] Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect [or complete or mature]? And the Scripture was fulfilled which says [bombshell], "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." And he was called the friend of God. You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.

Which is the Calvinists battle cry. They try to put the word "alone" in Ephesians 2:8. "You are saved by faith through grace" alone. And it is true in terms of justification at baptism but it is not true in terms of the complete faith that a Christian needs to have.

James said here, back in verse 21, that a person's faith is manifested, or shown, or made evident by his works, or action. That word justified there, if we really wanted to, we can make it into a phrase that is a little bit more understandable rather than justified. Was not Abraham our father shown to be upright, shown to be righteous, by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? James is saying that it is through works that faith is perfected. Another word that we could use for perfected here is matured, or completed, or even brought to fruition. Another way of putting it is that a person's works
show him to be upright. You know you have margins on a page, and you justify your text along one side or another. Maybe you justify it to the left margin or maybe you make it totally justified so that it goes from margin to margin but your text then looks upright. Well, that is the idea behind justification. It is all upright. So when it says here that Abraham our father was justified by works, he was shown to be upright, just like the plumb line. His works showed Him, when put it up against God's plumb line, His plumb bob, or whatever you want to call it, that he was straight and upright. He met the standard. So the works do not justify him in terms of being righteous.

It is not at the beginning because we do not have anything to show for it at the beginning. That is our justification. But what it shows is that we have proceeded through a period of sanctification. We are starting to be made righteous and holy, and when God puts His plumb line against us, the works that we do show Him that, yes, we actually do have faith. We do believe, and we are growing in righteous character. We are showing fruit.

So in this section here, James puts a dagger in Martin Luther's gut and gives it a twist by quoting the same verse that he did. His text, if you will, for his argument about being justified by works, is the same one that Paul used about being justified by faith. It works for both ends of the process, both the belief at the beginning—the faith—and also the fruition into godly works. It is that belief that is made manifest through the works, so he asserts here in James 2 that Abraham's actions on Mount Moriah fulfilled the righteousness that God credited him with. Remember, I said that God accounted righteousness to him? Well, it is almost like putting something into the bank. And when he actually sacrificed Isaac so many years later, it was like that investment had borne fruit. So God credited him with the righteousness and it took all that time for Abraham to grow spiritually to the point where he could sacrifice Isaac and complete the faith that he had shown in the very beginning.

Like I said, these are two sides of the same coin. It is not that one alone will do the trick. You cannot get into the Kingdom of God just doing works. You have to have faith, but you cannot get into the Kingdom of God just having faith. You have to have works. They really cannot be separated. One starts
things going and the other completes it until we are putting on the image of Jesus Christ and God says, "This is My son, in whom I am well pleased," or daughter, whichever one applies.

So until the time that he and Isaac walked up Mount Moriah and they laid down the wood and they put Isaac on there and until he raised his knife, even to that point, Abraham's righteousness, if you will, was all talk. But his works, when the knife came down, when the knife was beginning to slash Isaac's throat (it did not), but when he finally made that decision to do that, his works, his work there, put paid to his profession of faith, his profession of belief. It made his spiritual belief real. You could say he put his money where his mouth was. That yeah, he was going to believe God to the very second. And it actually passed the time when he was actually going to kill Isaac because God had said so. His works, his work specifically, that work of sacrificing Isaac, produced fruit from his mental and spiritual conviction.

Let me give you an illustration that hopefully will help you to understand this a little bit. I love Mozart, favorite composer by far, and I could listen to him all the time. Well, what if Mozart's music never was written down and performed? Mozart's genius would have been entirely mental, just in his head. He could have written all the symphonies and the sonatas and all the other things that he did, all the operas and whatnot in his head. But if he did not put them on paper, what would they be? Nothing. But when he wrote them down and it was presented to a symphony orchestra or to an opera orchestra or to some chamber music players, it became real. You could hear it. You could imagine it as the story was playing out on the stage at the opera. Mozart's genius was nothing until it was made manifest, until it was made real by his work of actually putting it to music on a piece of paper and then sending it to musicians who could play it.

That is how it is with our faith. Our faith is real enough to us in our own head, and it is real enough to God because He understands us and He takes us at our word that we have faith. But it is not made manifest, not made real, until we put it into action and show that we actually do believe it. So you have these two sides: the profession of belief and the faith that starts the process, and you have, on the other end, the actual doing of a work that proves to God that the faith is real. And what did God say after Abraham did this and He supplies the ram? "Now I know that you believe."
That is basically the whole point of this, but it is important for us to understand this: that we cannot separate the two. Faith is great and wonderful, and we will not get anywhere without it. But it is going to be dead unless we follow it up with works, with actually showing God that we are going to do the things that He tells us to do, that He obliges us to do. So our works are visible, actual, manifest, certain concrete proof of our faith.

So we see the whole process of faith producing righteousness in the story of Abraham and Isaac. It goes from the promise of God of a son to God's intervention to save that son's life on Mount Moriah. That period in Genesis 15-22 covers a period of about 45 years, depending, of course, on how old Isaac was when that happened. The Jews, their tradition says that he was 25. Some have speculated that he was actually 33, the same age as Jesus Christ was, of which he is a type. We do not know. So it took a sizeable slice of Abraham's life to go from profession of faith to performing this significant work of faith. A long time, as many as 45 or 50 years.

That fits very nicely with my theory that the 50 day count to Pentecost approximates, in a-day-for-a year fashion, the span of a converted person's walk with God. By 50 years in the church, which some of us may be approaching or more, we should be producing good fruit—works of faith. That is a long time. But God gives us a long time to grow so that we understand what He requires and give it back to Him in those sacrifices.

Let us go back to Genesis 21. I want to, before we close, set the chronological and circumstantial stage for Abraham's sacrifice. I do not want to go into this to any depth. But I want to just have a run up to Genesis 22 so we can understand what Abraham was going through at the time.

**Genesis 21:22-33** And it came to pass at that time that Abimelech and Phichol, the commander of his army, spoke to Abraham saying, "God is with you in all that you do. Now therefore, swear to me by God that you will not deal falsely with me, with my offspring, or with my posterity; but that according to the kindness that I have done to you, you will do to me and to the land in which you have dwelt." And Abraham said, "I will swear." Then Abraham reproved Abimelech because of the well of water which
Abimelech's servants had seized. And Abimelech said, "I do not know who has done this thing; you did not tell me, nor had I heard of it until today." So Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two of them made a covenant. [They made an agreement.] And Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock by themselves. Then Abimelech asked Abraham, "What is the meaning of these seven ewe lambs which you have set by themselves?" And he said, "You will take these seven ewe lambs from my hand, that they may be a witness that I have dug this well." Therefore he called that place Beersheba because the two of them swore an oath there. Thus they made a covenant at Beersheba. So Abimelech rose with Phichol the commander of his army, and they returned to the land of the Philistines. Then Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there called on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God. And Abraham stayed in the land of the Philistines many days.

This covenant that he made with Abimelech is a greater matter than we usually make it out to be. We usually just fly by this and not give it a whole lot of inspection. But Abraham had come to Canaan at 75, and of course, we understand several decades had passed. Abraham may have been as old as 125, 130 years at this point, maybe a little bit younger. He had been waiting patiently. Remember, that is what we saw in Hebrews 11, that he waited for God to give him the inheritance. And along the way he had gone through various trials and setbacks, and he had grown through all those things. He lied twice. But you know, we hope that he was learning his lesson through all of that stuff.

Yet in all that time and through all that growth, God had not given him one square inch of land in Canaan. He was still, after all those good works that he was doing along the way, a sojourner, an alien in a foreign land. Yet here, with this covenant that he made with Abimelech, he acquires control of a small amount. He acquires a well at Beersheba. So this act, this agreement, means that he is putting down roots, finally, after all these years, and he is legally recognized by the powers in the land by Abimelech. Later, if you go to chapter 23, verse 6, you see that the Hittites in Hebron call him "a mighty prince among [them.]" So now he is being recognized as a great man and part of the land. And they call him among them, so they were accepting him.
It appears that God's promises are starting to be fulfilled, even just a little bit, that he is given control over a well. This covenant that he was he made here with Abimelech meant that he was at peace with the Philistines. They could easily have been his enemies, but God had worked it out, even through a bad situation like Abimelech's men seizing the well, that they turned it all around, and now he and Abimelech we are good buds. All is well. He seems to have arrived after all that time. He is wealthy, he is settled. He is at peace. He is landed, well in a small way, and he has prestige, and he also has an heir, Isaac. Isaac has been born already.

Then verses 33-34 provide more information. He plants this tamarisk tree. It is a desert shade tree, and it may indicate by the choice of the tree (other places it had been oaks and such), but with the tamarisk tree, it might be an indication that God was giving him peace and rest because tamarisk trees were shade trees that one rested under in the hot wilderness. It was a place where you could put your feet up and even in in the wilderness you could feel like you were getting rest and being at peace.

And this tree must have been some sort of marker for something momentous that had occurred. The most likely thing was that he had made the covenant with Abimelech. So he was using this symbolic action in order to say, to himself and to others—his people, maybe even the Philistines—that this is where I am going to stay. I am finally here. I am finally in the place where God wants me to be. And so he called upon God's name. Sometimes that means he preached. It is kind of interesting that he may have actually started doing some evangelism here in Beersheba. If for nothing else, he worshipped God. But he did all this as thanks to God, as a symbol of his thanks to God for His long term care of him.

We can see that in the name he gives God here, the everlasting God. It is the two words el olam, which means God of eternity, or the everlasting God. He sees God's providential care over him lasting all the way to eternity because that is how long the promise went. The promise for the son and that He would make his children as the stars of heaven. And, of course, it all takes in the Promised Seed symbolism as well. He is thinking that God is beginning to come through on all His promises. So the things that had happened verified to Abraham that God's promises were sure all the way to eternity.
He was showing through planting this tamarisk tree and calling on the name of the Lord that he believed it and it would happen. All these things that God had promised would happen.

Now, this implies to us as readers that the things that had happened, the events that had happened, were significant faith builders for Abraham. He was seeing in the details of his life that God was indeed still with him. He was understanding that his Lord, his God, was and is in no way limited by anyone or anything. If He says it, it will happen.

Finally, when we get to verse 34 the narrator informs us that Abraham dwelled among the Philistines for many days. He was in this state, in this position, in this restful, peaceful state, where he was also very wealthy and had good relations with his neighbors, for a long time. We do not know how long. It does not say. It just says many days and many days often means many years. And he stayed there because of that—that he was at peace and all was well. His son was growing up. His heir was making him proud every day, and things just looked great. He may have thought that his life was complete. I am assuming a little bit here. He may have thought he would live quietly there in Beersheba to the end of his days.

He could not have known, though, that his greatest trial was still in the future. He did not know what was coming. He did not have a chapter 22 to look at. As one theologian, F. B. Meyer, would write, "From a clear sky, a thunderbolt was about to fall, threatening to destroy all his happiness at a single stroke." He had no idea that God in this peaceful, restful time, his retirement, if you will, that God would ask him to sacrifice his son. Let us go back to Hebrews 11, and we will finish here. We were already here, but I want to read them again.

**Hebrews 11:9-10** By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for a city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

Verse 10 is very important.
Because we know the end of the story—we do have a Genesis 22—we know that Abraham's faith never wavered at this point in his life. He was strong and steady in faith, like I said, all the way up to the point where Isaac was as good as dead. The knife was raised. The long comfortable rest that he had in Beersheba did not make him complacent one bit. Wealth and peace seems to affect certain ones that we find in Revelation the third chapter named the Laodiceans. They say that they are rich and do not need anything and their faith is small. They are willing to compromise.

Why was Abraham's faith so strong? Why was he able to have this faith through this whole period of time? Many years, five decades or whatever it is. Well, Paul's answer, or the writer of Hebrews answer, is that he waited for the city which has foundations whose builder and maker is God. Now, to understand this fully, we need to understand or realize that city and foundations in verse 10 oppose the words foreign country and tents in verse 9. Abraham realized that his situation in the land of the Philistines was temporary. He was living in a tent in Beersheba all this time, but he knew what his future was, it was the Kingdom of God. In the city that has foundations; a tent has no foundations. A tent can get washed right down the wadi. But a city that has foundations is permanent. He did not live in Beersheba in a tent, he lived in his head in the Kingdom of God, in the city that he was waiting for. That is why he did not become complacent, because he knew that God was pushing him, moving him, preparing him for the Kingdom of God, a more permanent solution to all his problems.

And he never forgot this. He waited for the Kingdom of God. The King James Version uses the word looked. He looked for a city, which is, I think, a lot better in terms of the imagery. It implies steady and patient searching. He kept moving forward, trying to find it, trying to make it actual. And he knew he could only do that by remaining faithful and preparing himself. So he never stopped yearning. He never stopped pressing towards God's Kingdom, even when times were prosperous and easy when he could have let down, laid back, taken a vacation. But he did not. He pressed on for the Kingdom.

Let us be more like Abraham!