

## The Providence Of God (Part Six)

### Jacob's Example

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I would like to be able to pick up where I left off three weeks ago with Jacob's life. There is very much we can learn from him, but I think the most important thing is that his life shows that it is God who orders life. Jacob had a very difficult time learning this lesson.

"God prevails" is what Israel means. Jacob supplanted, but he could not supplant God's will for him. It took a wrestling match with God for Jacob to finally learn that lesson. It is also important to understand that although Jacob was a physically strong man (he was a gifted man in many respects) he, like most of us, was driven to a great extent by his fears rather than his strengths. What he feared was living by faith. He was fearful that if he did not follow his will he would not get what he wanted out of life. His will was at times quite carnal. He was blind to the spiritual implications of what he was doing. His vision of where he was headed with life was blurred.

I can remember in one of the sermons I gave in this series how well the *Living Bible* caught the essence of God's controversy with Israel in reference to Hosea 12:6, which I will read to you out the King James Version.

**Hosea 12:5-6** Even the LORD God of hosts, the LORD is his memorial.  
Therefore turn thou to thy God: keep mercy and judgment, and wait  
on thy God continually.

*The Living Bible* had that translated:

Live by the principles of love and justice and always be expecting  
much from him your God.

That is what Jacob had to learn. He kept supplanting others in situations by bending them to *his* will rather than patiently waiting for God to fight the battle for him. He instead exercised the great gifts God gave him. Sometimes

it was his physical strength. Sometimes it was his intellect, and he deceitfully manipulated people in order to make sure he got what he wanted out of life.

This is a very difficult lesson for us to learn. Can we wait for God to bless us? Can we wait for Him to come through? Do we really catch the essence of this thing that it is God who orders life and that He has in His mind His will for us? Where He is taking our life may be somewhat different from where we think we ought to be going. Sometimes that way is arduous. It is scary, sometimes, to live by faith. That was part of Jacob's problem. He, like all of us, was driven by his fears. His strength was God, but it took him a long time to learn that lesson.

So, in other words, God is saying here, "Quit taking and getting for the self through self-centered, self-serving lawbreaking." Jacob would use deceit to get what he wanted. He would take advantage of another person's weakness, such as Esau.

The wonderful thing in all of this is that God never lost patience with Jacob. God kept working with him to finally bring him to stop contending and wrestling with Him in order to live his life, much more than he ever had before, by faith.

If you are familiar with the Bible it is good to understand that Jacob is the name associated with his fears and frailties when he managed his own affairs. All he had to do was make use of those wonderful gifts in work. But Israel is the name associated with him when he truly surrendered to God. In fact, God became his ruler and all he had to do was worship, if you understand the biblical use of the word worship. All he had to do was worship by yielding to Him.

This is perhaps the major lesson of life once God has called us and we have begun our pilgrimage to the Kingdom of God. Adam and Eve rejected God's rule. Each one of us has been charged with the responsibility of living by faith revealing that, in our lives, God rules us.

A spiritual Israelite is one whose own wild, self-centered, stubborn will is broken so that God's creative work can be completed. A spiritual Israelite is one who sees his spiritual and moral poverty. He becomes poor in spirit

before God. He is one who mourns over what he is, as well as his sins. He is meek and compliant in God's hands.

God's providence is what supplies us with the events by which we are to learn and to inculcate that lesson. God must see, through our life experiences, that He rules us. That is the issue in life. Will we allow God to rule us or will we live a life breaking His commands?

The scattering of the church has been a confusing and sometimes bitter experience for us. But when we see it in its right light, it is in reality an act of grace on God's part. It is for our good. And under the circumstances, it is the best thing that could have happened to us because if we had continued the way we were going, we would be lost. He could not allow it to go on. In a sense, we forced God's hand by our attitudes and by the way we were living. We need to recognize this and make positive use of it by doing what we can to strengthen our relationship with Him.

In this sermon we are going to take a look at another event that God provided in the lives of major biblical characters. It is an experience that one man and one woman had that almost defies understanding on my part. I can understand it in general terms, why it was so ordered by God, but on the other hand I have to suspend my ethical concepts by resorting to, "Well, He's God and He can do anything that He wants."

I am speaking of what Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac had to go through in regard to God's command to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham and Sarah are held up to us as perhaps being the finest examples of faith in God over a long period of time and under very, sometimes extremely difficult circumstances. I do not mean that they were perfect. Nobody is. But they were different from Isaac and Jacob. This is my judgment, but of all the personalities in the Bible to whom a great deal of space is given that perhaps only Joseph and Moses approach them as examples of faith over such long periods of time.

Because of this, there are some aspects of our relationship with God that need to be learned from them. They are given to us as examples to, in a sense, measure ourselves against. In order to grasp what they went through, I

think we have to begin to think of this in terms of how God was interfacing with mankind at that time. It was very direct. In many cases it was face to face. This is the way it was with Abraham and Sarah from time to time.

Today it is different. We have the fullness of His Word as well as having His Spirit and He is not confronting us in the same way He did with them. So it is possible for us to read this story with it not having quite as much impact if God Himself was standing in front of us telling us what to do. It must have been quite shocking to Abraham and Sarah, at least it seems that way to me. And I know we are not as close to God as they were.

But I want you to think about this. They received this command from a very close and trusted friend. One that they had entertained in their own tent, knowing full well who He was. I think it must have had quite a bit of impact on them.

Also, because of the closeness of their relationship and the distance in our relationship with God, we are not tested to the same degree. In principle we are tested, but not to the same degree.

**Genesis 22:1-2** Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." And He said, "Take now 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."

"Your only son." The emphasis in this chapter is on 'only' and 'love,' 'the one you love'. I think that these things are what hit Abraham with a tremendously, emotional impact. He had another son, Ishmael, and he had an extremely faithful servant in Eliezer, but Isaac, like Joseph was to Jacob, was the apple of his eye.

It is interesting that Jacob, in a way, had to go through something just like Abraham did. It is almost as if Joseph died as far as Jacob was concerned. He thought he was killed by a beast only to be "resurrected" a number of years later.

Consider that Abraham, not only loving him as if he was an only son, also knew that Isaac was the result of a long-awaited, direct miracle. Twenty-five years he waited for the fulfillment of the promise given by the very One who was now ordering that son's sacrifice. It is not like he was giving the child up to disease or to an accident and that indeed may be bitter, but it is understandable. Far more understandable than being told by your very Creator to kill your heir. An heir that you love very deeply. This was very difficult to deal with.

He also carried with him the knowledge that both spiritually and physically Isaac was the human key to the fulfilling of the promises of the very One who was now ordering his deliberate execution.

Who would ever think of Him as a friend? One so loving and kind. How could a friend demand something so jarring and cruelly harsh? All of the hopes and the dreams that you had for that one.

**Genesis 22:3** So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son; and he split the wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place which God had told him.

I think this verse is partly inserted here to let us know that Abraham did not just stoically and fatalistically walk through this without any feeling. Why does it say that he rose up early in the morning and he saddled his donkey and he chopped the wood?

I want to bring to your attention that Abraham was pretty old by this time and besides, and perhaps even more importantly, he was a very rich man. Even the Bible calls him exceedingly rich. But this verse tells you that he got up early, he saddled his own donkey and he chopped the wood. A man that had an army of three hundred eighteen trained soldiers must have had hundreds of servants who could have saddled his donkey and chopped the wood. But the Bible very specifically says that this rich, old man did it himself.

Now, why? Was it because his mind was in turmoil and he could not sleep? So he got up early because His mind was churning through the night? He chopped the wood and he saddled the donkey thinking, maybe, that if he kept his mind busy, kept his hands busy, that he would be able to get his mind off what he knew was going to happen three days hence?

Did any of you see the movie "The Bible"? They came across this verse in the making of the movie and I do not think they were entirely correct in the way they portrayed it. They portrayed Abraham as being angry, shaking his fist at God as he went along the way. I think they caught the essence of his mind in the sense that he, undoubtedly, was in a tremendous amount of mental, emotional strain. But I do not think he got angry at God. It is possible to be under a great deal of strain, realizing you have to do something that is very distasteful, yet at the same time not get angry. But emotional turmoil, yes.

Where was Isaac's mind in all of this? I am pretty sure that Abraham and Isaac did not spend three days together on the back of a donkey talking about the weather. Almost any conversation between such closely related people who deeply loved one another, who shared a common household and did the work together, would include subjects that had a past, a present, and a future to them.

What kind of feeling would Abraham be charged with regarding Isaac and especially Isaac's future and any relationship that he and Sarah might have with this one that they loved so deeply? What would you say to your son, your only son whom you loved in a special way, without revealing the fullness of what might happen in a very short period of time?

What we are looking at here is an example of the exercise of free moral agency within God's provision. It is buttressed by faith within the framework of God's great overall plan of reproducing Himself in us, but also falling within what could appear to the main character, Abraham, as a very cruel curse.

Now ask yourself, using the common understanding of the word providential, did that which God provided for Abraham and Isaac appear providential to Abraham? Maybe so, maybe no, but in fact it was.

**Genesis 22:5** And Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; and the lad and I will go yonder and worship, and we will come back to you."

Here we are on the third day and in the story Abraham's faith is noticeably coming to the fore. Any wrestling that he had done with God had slipped into the background even though, without a doubt, a great deal of emotion remained, his resolve was set. "The lad and I will come back".

**Genesis 22:6-7** So Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife, and the two of them went together. But Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, "My father!" And he said, "Here am I, my son." Then he said, "Look, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"

You can see now that Isaac had not been clued into what was going on. So they did not talk about the sacrifice on the way there.

**Genesis 22:8-12** And Abraham said, "My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering." So the two of them went together. Then they came to the place of which God had told him. And Abraham built an altar there and placed the wood in order; and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. And Abraham stretched out his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. But the Angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" So he said, "Here I am." And He said, "Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do you anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me."

In verses six through twelve Isaac's faith in God is shown in his submission to his father and it comes to the fore. But at this point it is not the main point of the story. But it too is a major example as well.

We are going to leave Genesis 22 and go back to Hebrews 11, because here it tells how Abraham was able to set his resolve.

**Hebrews 11:17-19** By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, "In Isaac your seed shall be called," concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense.

Within those verses it tells us how he was able to do what he did by following through in obedience to God despite how everything on the surface looked to the eye and emotions as being bad, evil. Jacob (we will reflect back on him just a little bit) is shown as a man having very difficult wrestlings bringing his will into line with God's will. Abraham is shown as a man who had his will under control despite whatever personal cost there might have been to himself.

The word 'accounting' in verse 19 is a bookkeeping term, an arithmetic term. It means "to calculate, to reason through." In modern parlance, Abraham *added things up*. His conclusion was that God had the power to resurrect and perhaps, even more importantly, the character to keep His word given in the promises.

The power was not the issue. He knew who God was. But would God have the character to keep His word. He did. Abraham banked on that and thus he overcame his feelings about how things looked. He obeyed to the point where God was satisfied and He intervened, saving Isaac's life. In Abraham's mind, Isaac was already as good as dead and resurrected.

What God learned was that Abraham indeed was in no way walking by sight. Think of it this way: Despite the fact that it was possible that everything looked to the eyes and ears as if it was a dreadful curse, the very worst of a worse case scenario that one could possibly think of, Abraham really knew

his friend God. I mean he *knew* Him! His faith was not merely on the surface. It was not merely an intellectual knowing about God. Certainly intellect was involved, but he knew God, as it were, inside and out. He knew God would never go back on His promise.

And so what happened? His faith rose above his feelings and therefore he fully complied with God's command.

Think of it in this sequence. Abraham believed and loved God, who had promised him a son. After many years of waiting, Abraham received this promised son and he loved him deeply, too. Then his Friend and his Master, God, called upon Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, which set up this dilemma. If Abraham sacrificed Isaac he would keep God, but lose his son. If he disobeyed God, Abraham would keep Isaac but lose God. A "catch 22" of the greatest magnitude.

It appeared there was no way he could win, but as we know, there was. That way was to trust his Friend. He arrived at this by calculating things based on his knowing God and chose to obey God's command to sacrifice Isaac.

We are to understand that this was in no way a flippant, unthinking, emotionless act on Abraham's part. But it was nonetheless a deliberate, calculated choosing of an almost unthinkable action done on the basis of faith. Not merely an intellectual belief, but faith solidly rooted in his knowing God.

On the other side of the picture, i.e., from God's point of view, we also see a somewhat familiar picture. Think back of what the book of Job presents us with, when God challenged Satan to see whether Job's faith and loyalty were real. As with Abraham, God knew Job's mind.

What about us in our trials? There is no point to this story unless we can make it apply to us. Let us just take this one point. Turn to I Corinthians 10.

**I Corinthians 10:12-13** Wherefore let him that thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. There has no temptation [No trial! None!] taken you but such as is common to man, but God is faithful who will not allow you to be tempted above what you are able, but will

with the temptation also make a way to escape that you may be able to bear it.

Was Abraham given a way to escape? Absolutely! But he had to trust God, did he not? Are we tested to the same degree that Abraham was? I made the statement earlier that, no, we are not tested to that degree, yet I want you to understand that the tests that do come upon us are to the degree that we are able to bear and overcome. So our trials and tests of faith are going to seem very difficult to us. Maybe to Abraham they would seem like sandbox, but to us they are hard. Hard in much the same way that a twelfth grader in school might think first grade trials are sandbox. But to the first grader it is pretty hard.

So there is a balance here. In these two verses there is a warning as well as an encouragement. The warning is to not get puffed up and toss off the events of life as if they are of no account. Are we learning that God is watching, not in a cruel way at all. He is not out to get us, to squash us. He is not out to punish us.

But in the same manner as a teacher watches over his or her students in order to guide them to higher levels of understanding and wisdom and use of what is being taught, so God is watching over us. He is testing us, bringing us up to a higher level all the time, but never testing us over and above what we would be able to endure. But we *are* being tested.

We should not consider that what we go through in life is just nothing. God is watching all the time. They are meaningful to Him and they ought to be meaningful to us because of His evaluation. He is judging the way we react within what He provides.

The encouragement is His promise that He will never tempt us beyond what we are able. So we are not being tested to the degree He did Abraham, but He is testing us to the degree that He understands that we are able to endure and overcome.

Now, Moms and Dads—I see a lot of those in this room—how many times have you heard your kids say, "I can't do it. It's too hard for me. I can't! I can't!" What do you do in relation to your kid? "Oh, come on now. I know

you can do it." This is what I meant when I said about Jacob that the wonderful thing is that God patiently never gave up on Jacob. He kept working and working and working with him until Jacob finally got it! He was a changed man after that. Do we not feel every once and a while "I got it!"? Yes, we do. And I think that gives God pleasure as well.

On the one hand He warns "don't think that He's not involved" because He is. He gives an encouragement then that He is watching over us so closely that He will never let us get over our heads. To me that is a wonderful thing because I know, just like I said about our children, I like to complain to God that it is too hard. I cannot do it. I am afraid.

Those fears are natural, but they have to be overcome. I am sure that when Abraham was going through this he was fearful of what his decision would be as well. Until he finally got there, on the third day, and God gives us insight that his resolve was set. He was going to go through it regardless of what it cost him. It was the right choice.

There is much more we can learn from Abraham because his experience here was not isolated from the rest of his life in any way. Abraham did what is called *living by faith* regardless of what the immediate circumstances appeared to be to the senses. Never forget that God engineered this whole episode and that it unfolded over a long period of time. Even today its effects are still reverberating because we are looking into it and we are learning from it. It is affecting our lives.

What happened there did not happen in a vacuum. It was inextricably linked, not only with his life, but actually with the whole of God's plan that He is working out. This was a *very* important event. Not only Abraham's and Isaac's lives were linked to the future in what was going on here, so are our lives linked to what happened there about 4,000 years ago. This was a *big* event.

Of course, as we understand it prefigured God Himself giving up His only begotten Son—the only one, as far as we know, in all creation who could share life with Him on the same level. In one sense angels do not cut it. Only Jesus Christ. God, in that sense, did give Him up. He did not stop the execution.

This was undoubtedly the supreme test of Abraham's faith. It was not the only one by far. The father of the faithful set the example for his children in living by faith. We can look to Jesus Christ, but He was *God* in the flesh. We might get the idea that somehow or another He had an advantage over us. But we cannot get around the example of Abraham and Sarah, or Isaac for that matter.

If Abraham, Sarah and Isaac could do this, why can *we* not, seeing as how we have a God who will not allow us to be tested above what we are able. The key to this thing is *knowing God*. The key to this is *God's faithfulness*. That is what pulled Abraham through. He knew that God had the power. What was being tested was Abraham's belief in God's faithfulness. He is the faithful God and He follows through.

Abraham not only believed, but he believed so deeply that it became the motivation for what he did. Not just in this case. This is just what we are focusing on. He lived by faith and it was the motivation for Abraham's life.

The New Testament especially makes it clear that God is very concerned about our motivations— what they are in relation to what we do, and where do those motivations come from. Do they come from the self-centered, defiling, human nature, our human heart? Or do they come from a living faith in the true God?

Why do you do what you do? Why do you live life the way you live? Why do you worship God the way you worship? And if you understand worship in the biblical sense it means, really, how do we yield in all of life. That is giving one's devotion to God. That is the kind of devotion He is looking for.

It is not merely a sense of awe that one gets in a service in a church somewhere. As far as God is concerned, the way we work is an act of worship, whether it be in a shipyard or on a farm, a salesman, or whatever it is. Are we willing to yield to God's way of doing things by faith? Do we worship Him in our marriage? How do we treat our mate and our children worshipping God? Is the way we treat one another an act of faith because we

trust what God says? Worship with God extends out into every area of life. Abraham did not only believe intellectually, but it was the motivation for the way he lived life.

Turn with me back to Genesis 15. I am going to lay the foundation for the next sermon which will pick up on this. We will conclude with this section.

**Genesis 15:6** And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness.

I want to tell you where I am headed because I think it is important to understand, i.e., in God's mind. I have to put it this way because God looks at things differently than we do. Much of conversion is coming to the mind of God in things and looking at things, looking at life the way God does. It is as we gain this perspective of "let this mind be in you" whether it is in terms of attitude, or the day of worship, or the holy days. These things become the reason why we act as we do.

In God's mind, true living faith and obedience, what we might call our works, though they are specifically different are virtually synonymous from God's point of view. I am going to prove this to you. Faith and obedience are interchangeable even though they are specifically not the same things. This is not at all uncommon in the Bible. Do you remember the series of sermons on the Holy Spirit where mind, heart, and spirit are so interconnected, they cannot really be separated even though they are specifically not the same things? So true, living faith and obedience, our works, though specifically different, are virtually synonymous from God's perspective.

It says here that Abraham believed in the LORD and He counted to him for righteousness. Let us go back to the book of Romans, which Paul wrote. We are going to look at this because Paul quotes Genesis 15:6 here. If you have a title or subtitle at the beginning of chapter four as my Bible does, it says, "Abraham's Justification." Now remember what we just read in Genesis 15.

**Romans 4:1-3** What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham were justified by

works, he has wherefore to glory; but not before God. For what says the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness.

That is the same as saying that, because Abraham believed he was justified. He was legally righteous before God. This verse becomes the basis for Paul's argument that justification is by faith, not works. He does that on the basis of the fact of what this occasion in Genesis 15 shows. One of the things that Paul does not mention is that Genesis 15:6 occurred fourteen years before Abraham was circumcised. Paul's conclusion on this then is that because of what it says in Genesis 15:6, Abraham was justified by faith. The work of circumcision did not come for fourteen years later. The circumcision did not justify him, the faith did.

**Romans 4:9** Comes this blessedness [i.e., justification, being legally righteous before God] then upon the circumcision only, or upon the uncircumcision also? For we say that faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness.

A very strong argument.

**Romans 4:19-24** And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah's womb: He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; and being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform. And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness. Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him; but for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead.

So we see an application made by Paul for us, that we too are justified, cleared of guilt, have the sins wiped out of the way by the blood of Jesus Christ, because we believe. Paul's conclusion then is justification by faith. Now here comes the paradox. It does not stand alone. How do I know that? Because the book of James tells me in chapter two.

**James 2:20-24** But will you know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works [Not faith. What do we have here, a contradiction—a paradox?], when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? See you how faith worked with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? And the scripture was fulfilled which says, Abraham believed God and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the friend of God. You see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.

The paradox is beginning to dissolve. Not by faith only. Are you aware that Paul said almost the same thing? Two chapters before he said what he said in Romans 4, he said in Romans 2:

**Romans 2:13** For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified.

We are beginning to see something that is very important to understand. Living faith cannot be separated from works. It may seem like a paradox. It may even seem like an oxymoron. But faith and works go together and where there is living faith, there will always, always, always be works. If no works are produced there is no living faith.

The next time I speak on this subject we will go into that and I will prove it to you from the Scriptures.