

Text: Genesis 22:1-18

Theme: The Ultimate Challenge

February 18, 2018

Maybe you're in the category or maybe not, but Americans love a challenge, a competition, an opportunity to prove they are stronger, tougher, faster than everyone else. They enjoy it so much that there are even TV shows promoting every kind of challenge you can imagine. Although that may be true, there's one challenge that no one appreciates. It's the challenge found in our text, the challenge Abraham faced. It's a faith challenge or what we might call, "The Ultimate Challenge."

I. When the ultimate challenge arrives at our doorsteps, God always intends it for our good. A. Even so, we attempt to opt out of His challenges. 1. We opt out because we don't like faith challenges. Step into Abraham's sandals. Could you have done it? Would you have said, "Bring it on. I can handle it," or have run the other way before you even knew the details? We may think we are tough, that we thrive on challenges, but when a faith challenge arrives, we know instantly that this isn't what we had planned for the day, week, month, or sometimes even years. Put the toughest person you know into Abraham's situation and you would have seen him crumble.

2. We opt out because we forget that faith challenges are ultimately for our good. When you think of good, do you think pain, heartache, mental exhaustion, struggles like you've never experienced? As we mentally consider God's faith challenges, we most often see the opposite of good. Maybe we can put on a good face and act like it's for our good, but on the inside, on the faith side, the side that actually matters, we struggle, we debate, we argue, we try to make deals, we attempt anything we can think of to avoid the ultimate challenge because what we see isn't good. What we see and what our brains envision is in direct opposition to God's intentions.

3. We opt out because we think God is expecting too much of us. Go back to Abraham. Was it fair, was it appropriate for God to ask Abraham to sacrifice his only son? We don't even need to think about it, do we? If we had been Abraham, we know what we would have done. We would have refused, insisted God was asking too much, and that if God really loved us, He would never ask that of us. When God sets the ultimate challenge before you, your first thought won't be to go and do. Why? Because we lack the faith Abraham possessed, because, as strong as we think our faith is, it won't be ready for the ultimate challenge.

B. How then, do we respond to God's challenges when they arrive? 1. We accept the challenge as coming from a loving God. Did Abraham understand? Did it make sense? Was there a logical explanation? Abraham's only choice was to believe his challenge was from a loving God, that somehow, some way, God was going to do something good in the midst of something incredibly tragic. We can argue, debate, insist, attempt to run, and anything else we can dream up, but what God waits to see from us is acceptance, the willingness to stand and go when nothing makes sense, the commitment to face the challenge simply because God has said, "Go."

2. We remember that Jesus has been there, done that. "That's totally different because He's God." But our reaction is inaccurate. Look at our Gospel. Jesus is baptized and the Voice says, "With You I am well pleased." But what's the very next sentence? "The Spirit immediately drove Him out into the wilderness." Whatever

challenge you face, Jesus has been there, done that. Whatever event He waits for you to endure, He has endured. He has been there, done that, and done far more than anything we will ever face. When we believe that truth, as we cling to that truth, it enables us to respond to our challenge more appropriately.

3. We respond by enduring. As Abraham faced the ultimate challenge, what were his options? He had only two - quit or endure. Imagine what Abraham must have endured during that three day journey, what must have gone through his mind day and night. If we began his journey, our minds would have been filled with questions like, "How can God be asking this of me? Surely, God will change His mind because He already knows I can't do this." But Abraham, because of his intense faith and unwavering trust, never speaks those words. Instead, he endures. He perseveres. He moves closer and closer to that climactic event without uttering a word.

4. We respond with the conviction that God will get us to the other side. Did Abraham know God would step in at just the right moment? Even if Abraham thought for a moment that God would step in, that moment vanished as Abraham raised the knife to sacrifice his son. In Abraham's mind, the other side was going to be minus his only son because, as he raised the knife, time had run out for any other result. When our challenge pushes us to the edge of the cliff, and we think that it's all over, that God isn't going to show up, we must continue to believe that God will lead us to the other side, whatever that other side looks like.

5. We respond by choosing absolute obedience. As Abraham left on his journey, as he built the altar, as he did everything during those long three days, Abraham practiced absolute obedience, the same absolute obedience God waits to see in us. James writes in our Epistle, "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial." Steadfast - unwavering, immovable, intently focused, unwilling to debate, argue, or challenge God's reasoning, but willing to accept. Are you prepared to stand in that place, to stand in Abraham's sandals? The ultimate challenge will come more than once in your lifetime. Prepare for it by practicing absolute obedience. It's your only proper option.

6. We respond by realizing that God is preparing us for our next challenge. If Abraham had faltered, would his life have been recorded in Scripture? Because Abraham arrived at the other side, God used him to accomplish some of the greatest events recorded in history. Your faith challenge may never make the history books, but this we know with certainty. God is using your present or your next faith challenge as preparation for something more profound, something you will never know of unless you understand and believe with great conviction that your present challenge is God's way, His only way of preparing you for what lies around the next corner.

7. Maybe you enjoy challenges; maybe not. Either way, God says to you this morning, "Prepare yourself. The next ultimate challenge has already left the starting blocks." Amen.