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Stages of Faith.

Stage I Gideon.

The familiar story of Gideon using a fleece to find out if God would be with him in battle.

Was he engaged in faith or presumption?

God, if you make someone on my door in ten minutes time, inquiring about our house, I will then know it is your will to sell this house.

Is this a valid method?

Judges 6-8, read in context.

The Midianites (from southeast of Israel), Amalekites (from the south), and some eastern nomads were annually raiding the Israelites.

The Midianites were fierce desert nomads who banded together to make raids on the crops and animals of the Israelites. These dreaded raiders rode on camels and brought their animals to graze on Israelite land in the spring when barley and wheat were growing in the fields.

Politically and spiritually weak, the Israelites were no match for the invaders.

When the Israelites finally turned to God, He gave them a conqueror. But since God wanted to be recognized as the true deliverer, He chose an insignificant man as His instrument.

Gideon was threshing wheat in a rocky hollow usually used for crushing grapes, trying to keep out of sight of the invaders.

Usually, Gideon would have used oxen to thresh wheat on the community threshing floor. Out of fear of the Midianites, however, Gideon threshed his grain in secret.

Using a wooden instrument called a flail, Gideon laboriously pounded the grain in his father's wine press – a pit dug out of rocky ground.

The angel of the Lord sat down under an oak tree next to where Gideon was working. The angel gave Gideon a commission that Gideon hesitated to accept.

Judges 6:12-13, *And the Angel of the Lord appeared to him, and said to him, "The Lord is with you, you mighty man of valour!"* ¹³*Gideon said to Him, "O my lord, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all His miracles which our fathers told us about, saying, 'Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?' But now the Lord has forsaken us and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites."*

So, Gideon devised a test.

He prepared a generous food gift, as if for a sacrifice, and laid it on a rock. By consuming the food with fire, the angel of the Lord revealed that He was actually God. Gideon was afraid, because he realized that no one can see God and live. But after some divine protection and reassurance, Gideon built an altar as instructed.

Judges 6:19-20, *So Gideon went in and prepared a young goat, and unleavened bread from an ephah of flour. The meat he put in a basket, and he put the broth in a pot; and he brought them out to Him under the terebinth tree and presented them.* ²⁰*The Angel of God said to him, "Take the meat and the unleavened bread and lay them on this rock, and pour out the broth." And he did so.*

The Lord says he will use him to defeat the Midianites. In response Gideon asks for a sign.

The angel told Gideon to put these on a rock. When Gideon put them on the rock, the angel pointed his staff at the offering. When the tip of the staff touched the food, fire came from the rock. The fire burned up everything that had been on the rock. Now Gideon knew that this was really an angel. He knew that God had really chosen him to save the Israelites. Gideon built an altar and worshipped the Lord.

The first thing that Gideon did was to tear down the altar that his father had built. This altar was not built to worship God. This altar was built like an idol. Gideon's family worshipped the false god, Baal, at this altar. They had even made a tall pole to worship an idol. Some of the Israelites were angry with Gideon but Gideon did what the Lord commanded.

When the Midianites started to come and hurt the Israelites again, Gideon gathered together an army. He still wanted to make sure that he was doing the right thing, so he prayed to God to give him another sign.

Judges 6:37-40, *look, I shall put a fleece of wool on the threshing floor; if there is dew on the fleece only, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that You will save Israel by my hand, as You have said.*" ³⁸*And it was so. When he rose early the next morning and squeezed the fleece together, he*

wrung the dew out of the fleece, a bowlful of water. ³⁹Then Gideon said to God, "Do not be angry with me, but let me speak just once more: Let me test, I pray, just once more with the fleece; let it now be dry only on the fleece, but on all the ground let there be dew." ⁴⁰And God did so that night. It was dry on the fleece only, but there was dew on all the ground.

Gideon put a piece of fleece (or lamb's wool) outside on the ground. Usually, if fleece was left outside on the ground, then dew would fall on it and make it wet. Both the ground and the fleece would be wet. This time Gideon asked the Lord to do something different. He asked the Lord to make the fleece wet during the night but to keep the ground dry.

When Gideon looked at the fleece the next morning, guess what had happened? The fleece was wet, and the ground was dry!

Next Gideon asked the Lord to do it one more time. This time he asked God to make the ground wet and the fleece dry. The next morning, the ground was wet, and the fleece was dry.

Just like Gideon asked!

Gideon knew that God wanted him to fight the Midianites. He knew that the Lord thought he was good enough to do the job.

Gideon decided to follow the Lord and do exactly what he wanted him to do!

Are you like Gideon?

You will only do what you demand from the Lord?

There are people who have faith in God only when their demands are met.

God in His grace and mercy understands our stupidity and answers them.

Stage II

Habakkuk

Habakkuk is writing about 18-20 years before Jerusalem is destroyed in **586 BC**.

Quite possibly he was alive to see that destruction – he may have been killed in the battle, or he may have starved during the siege, and he may have lived through it.

King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon surrounded the city and besieged it for two years, starving the people into submission. Eventually the King of Judah and his army tried to escape through a hole in the wall at night, but they were caught and

slaughtered. The Babylonian army then entered the city, looting, murdering, plundering, destroying.

In chapter 1 he called out, “God, why don’t you give us justice! Punish these evildoers!”

Habakkuk sees God as a consuming fire, pure and holy.

Habakkuk 3:16, *When I heard, my body trembled; My lips quivered at the voice; Rottenness entered my bones; And I trembled in myself, That I might rest in the day of trouble. When he comes up to the people, He will invade them with his troops.*

By 3:16 he sees the enormity of that punishment – the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. And he trembles.

Habakkuk has foreseen this event Jeremiah described. Starvation of young and old.

- Cannibalism of children.
- The destruction of Solomon’s temple.
- The apparent end of his country.

Habakkuk 3:17-19, *Though the fig tree may not blossom, Nor fruit be on the vines; Though the labour of the olive may fail, And the fields yield no food; Though the flock may be cut off from the fold, And there be no herd in the stalls— ¹⁸Yet I*

*will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.
19The Lord God is my strength; He will make my feet
like deer's feet, And He will make me walk on my high hills.*

The economy of Judah at this time was based almost exclusively on agriculture and livestock. Agriculture could be divided into permanent crops – fruit trees, olive trees, grape vines – and annual field crops, like wheat and barley.

- Figs, grapes, and olives, all the permanent crops.
- Fields, the annual crops, the staple foods, the source for most of the calorie supply.
- Flock, cattle, sheep, and cows. All their livestock are dead.

So, neither the permanent nor the annual crops have yielded anything

Habakkuk's situation is worse than anything we can imagine in this country.

How does Habakkuk respond to this situation?

Yet I will Rejoice!

Yet I will exult in the LORD, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.

He does NOT lash out at God in anger.

He does not say, “God, you have no right to destroy your people! You are a faithless God!”

He does NOT pretend that the evil won’t happen.

He doesn’t withdraw into a fantasy world, saying, “That’s too terrible to think about. I will close my eyes and think of something else. I will sit in front of the TV and get distracted.”

I will exalt in the Lord, I will REJOICE in the God of my salvation!

So why rejoice?

God is good!

He is wise!

He is in control!

He knows what He is doing!

What is the most difficult experience you have had to weather in your life?

What event most wrenched you emotionally?

For some that might be:

- the death of a spouse, or of a child, or of a parent,
- for others it might be an act of violence committed against you,
- for others, being ignored, rejected, or put down by someone you love,

- for others, the consequences of a sin you yourself committed.

What were your thoughts toward God at that difficult time in your life?

Did you pray?

If so, how? With tears? With anger? With a broken and contrite heart?

Will you be able to have faith in God in spite God is not answered your prayers?

Stage III

Apostle Paul

Paul was traveling by ship to Italy to appear before Caesar. They had been sailing for some time when a storm blew up. The weather was so bad they could not even use navigational sighting from the stars to compute their position. They had no idea how far they were or even what direction they were headed.

Acts 27:20, *Now when neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest beat on us, all hope that we would be saved was finally given up.*

There was no hope that Paul would be alive, yet he trusted had.

The faith is that even if it is death still holding on to God.

Final stage:

Abraham Father of Faith.

Abraham is also uniquely and repeatedly described as our father in faith.

When Jesus forgives Zacchaeus.

Luke 19:9, *And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham;*

In Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus.

Luke 16:22, *So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried.*

²⁴ *"Then he cried and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.'*

John the Baptist warns the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to be baptized.

Matthew 3:8-10, *Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance,⁹ and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.¹⁰ And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*

John's point is that being a biological descendant of Abraham isn't what matters. Rather, it's about following him in faith and in works of repentance. Speaking of Abraham's covenant of circumcision with God.

So, what makes Abraham so special?

God creates a series of covenants with Abraham tied to faith and linked to the Promised Land. These covenants ultimately find their fulfilment in the Messiah, who the opening line of the New Testament identifies as "Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (**Matthew 1:1**).

It's largely because of this story of salvation, of God revealing Himself to one group of people as a means of revealing Himself to the world, that Matthew's Gospel opens with the "book of genealogy," showing how all these Old Testament figures are related to one another and to Christ.

Abraham is also singular in the Old Testament for the intensity of his faith. This we see most clearly in the sacrifice of Isaac. Here, a little bit of background is necessary.

Genesis 17:19, *Then God said: “No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his descendants after him.*

Genesis 18:11, *Now Abraham and Sarah were old, well advanced in age; and Sarah had passed the age of childbearing.*

Genesis 17 says that Abraham is ninety-nine years old.

Genesis 17:1, *When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless.*

Genesis 17:17, *Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, “Shall a child be born to a man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?”*

Genesis 17:21, *But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this set time next year.”*

So, this salvific covenantal relationship between God and man, by which God is to save the world, is to continue through the lineage of Isaac.

Then the unthinkable happens.

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." ²Then 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."*

Abraham faced with two seemingly irreconcilable truths.

God is to bless all nations through Isaac, and he is to sacrifice Isaac. And his response isn't to give up one belief for the other, but to hold to both, in the face of seeming absurdity, because he completely trusts the God who is responsible for both.

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, ¹⁸of whom it was said, "In Isaac your seed shall be called," ¹⁹concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense.*

When we talk about the Sacrifice of Isaac a pre-figurement of Christ's Sacrifice on Calvary, we normally mean that Isaac carried the wood of his own sacrifice.

Genesis 22:6, *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.*

Genesis 22:14, *And Abraham called the name of the place, The-Lord-Will-Provide; as it is said to this day, "In the Mount of the Lord it shall be provided."*

The ram is the substitute for Isaac's life.

Genesis 22:13, *Then Abraham lifted his eyes and looked, and there behind him was a ram caught in a thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram, and offered it up for a burnt offering instead of his son.*

Abraham speaks cryptically of a lamb to be sacrificed for Isaac's (and it turns out, all our) sake.

Genesis 22:8, *And Abraham said, "My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering." So the two of them went together.*

Hebrews 11 points to another dimension of this parallel.

It's only through some sort of belief in the Resurrection that Abraham's faith makes any sense. He doesn't know how God will restore Isaac to him, but he's ready to believe that he will both.

a) sacrifice Isaac,

b) have descendants through Isaac.

This act of faith is literally paradoxical, in the sense of "seemingly absurd or self-contradictory."

Or to put it another way, Abraham knows that (a) and (b) can't both come true apart from divine intervention.

He doesn't know what that intervention will look like (a miraculous raising from the dead, for example, or – as happened – divine intervention to halt the sacrifice), but he acts with the full trust that God is faithful to His promises and will intervene as needed to bring their fulfillment about.

Abraham's faith is a model of good theology.

There will come points in which you encounter two seemingly irreconcilable truths, like God's Predestination and His Gift of Free Will. How these both can be true vexes the mind, yet we believe God about both.

Sometimes, brighter minds than our own come along and show how the two seemingly incompatible truths can be harmonized.

Other times, we trust simply that they can be, because we trust the revealing God more than we trust our own ability to work out every aspect of theology.

Critically, Abraham's faith isn't absurd. Hebrews 11 points out that he knows that if God can raise from the dead, then both the promise and the command can be true.

So, Abraham already has in view one possible way of reconciling this paradox. In this way, he shows us that while faith goes beyond our own abilities, that it does deal with the unseen, it's not an idiotic faith.

We don't affirm double truth, in which we affirm outright contradictions and laud that irrationality as faith.

Paul explains that all who have faith are sons of Abraham.

Galatians 3:7-9, *Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. ⁸And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, "In you all the nations shall be*

blessed.”⁹So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham.