

Responding to the New Atheists' attacks on the God of the Old Testament-14: "Child Abuse"(Part 3—2nd context: Faith vs. Unbelief)

To focus only on God's single command to offer up Isaac misses the big picture. Context is everything! In the last DDR we noted the context of the *reiterated* promises made to Abraham regarding a son. Now let us now turn our attention to the broad context of Abraham's *faith* in contrast to the Mosaic Law and Moses's crucial lack of faith that resulted in his failure to enter God's promises.

Biblical scholars have pointed out that the theme of faith holds the Pentateuch (Genesis-Deuteronomy) together at its seams. When the Apostle Paul reread the Scriptures in light of his encounter with Christ, he discovered that Abraham lived by faith and was declared righteous and was victorious *before the Mosaic Law existed*, cf., Rom. 4; Gal. 3-4. This is in contrast to Moses and the Israelites *who had the Mosaic Law* yet failed because of unbelief. It is no coincidence that when "have faith/believe" is mentioned in the Pentateuch, it is used positively *before* the giving of the law at Sinai in Exodus 20:

Genesis 15:6 Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Exodus 4:5 "that they may believe that the LORD, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you."

Exodus 14:31 And when Israel saw the great power which the LORD had used against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in His servant Moses

Exodus 19:9 And the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I shall come to you in a thick cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe in you forever." Then Moses told the words of the people to the LORD.

However, these words are used negatively ("did not believe") *after* Sinai:

Numbers 14:11 And the LORD said to Moses, "How long will this people spurn Me? And how long will they not believe in Me, despite all the signs which I have performed in their midst?"

Numbers 20:12 But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them."

Deuteronomy 1:32 "But for all this, you did not trust the LORD your God,
Deuteronomy 9:23 "And when the LORD sent you from Kadesh-barnea, saying, 'Go up and possess the land which I have given you,' then you rebelled against the command of the LORD your God; you neither believed Him nor listened to His voice.

One must not lose sight of the fact that the Pentateuch is in large part a contrast between Abraham and the Law. Though Abraham's faith wavered at times, it continued to grow. It's significant that Abraham trusted God—and was declared righteous—*before* the Law of Moses came. Even without the law, Abraham kept the intention or purport of the law because he *lived by faith*: "Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws" (Gen. 26:5). Notice the words used: these are post-Sinai law terms used in Deuteronomy ("obeyed," "charge," "commandments," "statutes," "laws"), yet they apply to Abraham before the law was given. The point is to show how Abraham essentially kept the laws and pleased God *because he lived by faith* (Gen. 15:6).

This is in contrast to Moses, who although had the Law, ultimately failed because he lacked faith. Although we can sympathize with Moses's frustration with the Israelites, the root cause of Moses's failure before God was lack of faith—he broke faith with God:

Numbers 20:12 But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "**Because you have not believed Me**, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them."

Deuteronomy 32:51 because **you broke faith with Me** in the midst of the sons of Israel at the waters of Meribah-kadesh, in the wilderness of Zin, because you did not treat Me as holy in the midst of the sons of Israel.

The broader context of Abraham and the Pentateuch is set within a picture of trust—without the benefit of the law. Abraham serves as an illustration across the ages of how God's people should live. The Israelites and Moses is the negative example—and a sobering reminder to legalistically minded Jews—that having the law and keeping it scrupulously are inadequate for being right with God. Rather, we are to approach Him trustingly, depending on His grace and sufficiency rather than putting confidence in our own sufficiency. Moses was a great man of God. However, when he struck the rock (which represented God's grace ultimately fulfilled at the Cross), he instantly moved into failure because he broke faith with God. Although Moses was a fantastic believer who played a crucial role in Israel's history, we can see a critical failure of faith in Moses—a failure which precluded him entering into the promised land. Moses ended up dying in the wilderness because of his and Aaron's lack of faith. It was his lack of faith that resulted in him treating God with contempt instead of holiness before the Israelites, cf., Num. 20:12.

The broader theme of Abraham's deep trust in God's promise and faithfulness helped shaped Israel's own self-understanding and identity. So it's not surprising to hear Moses's words to Israel at Sinai:

Exodus 20:20, Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test [the Hebrew verb is *nasah*] you, and in order that the fear [*yir'ah*] of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin.

These two key verbs link back to Genesis 22. Abraham was *tested* by God (Gen. 22:1) and through this ordeal demonstrated his fear/awe of God (v. 12). Abraham's obedience is intended to serve as a model for Israel and to inspire Israel's obedience and solidify their relationship with ("fear of") God.

The broader context is one of faith. In fact, one can make the case that the entire Pentateuch speaks of the success of faith of Abraham and the failure of faith of the Israelites and Moses (despite having God's law, His revealed Word). Failure to understand this broad context of faith and just focus on God's single command to offer up Isaac is to miss the whole point.

The Bible is explicit that "without faith it is impossible to please God," Heb. 11:6. But what is "faith"? Today in our anti-intellectual world (comprised of believers who are superstitious and unbelievers who are reductionists and have no metaphysical development), faith is some ambiguous concept of just believing in spite of or against knowledge. This is patently false!

Let's see if I can disambiguate the relationship between knowledge and faith. True knowledge and true faith are harmonious in that they both obtain reality/truth. However, the difference is how they obtain that reality. Knowledge per se is what man can personally demonstrate to others using rationalism and empiricism, such as melting ice at 32 degrees Fahrenheit, boiling water at 212 degrees Fahrenheit, that speed of light travels at 186,000 miles an hour, Einstein's theory of relativity of E=MC², and prove the existence of a god that all creation depends upon for its initial and continued existence. All of these can be demonstrated, although it requires a great deal more intellect in the cosmological proofs for the existence of God than melting ice at 32 degrees Fahrenheit.

True faith, on the other hand, refers to knowledge that man cannot publically demonstrate: one cannot publically demonstrate by rationality or empiricism truths such as the Trinity, the Hypostatic Union, Christ's substitutionary death on the cross, Heaven, or Hell. The orthodox Christian accepts these doctrine on faith—which means that he trusts the authority of the one who gives him these truths. He trusts God. He trusts in what the Bible says. Many of us really could not *personally* demonstrate Einstein's E=MC². We trust Einstein and scientists who have repeatedly verified this concept. So in this sense this knowledge would be accepted on the basis of faith in the scientists. In this case the only difference between faith in Einstein/scientists and God is that God is never wrong. Through rationalism and empiricism we can demonstrate that God exists, that Christ was resurrected, and that the Bible is the Word of God. However, when it comes to revelation for which there is no physical evidence: like Christ being our High Priest, we can only gain this KNOWLEDGE by trusting what God has revealed to us.

Another day closer to being with Him,

Pastor Don

Hebrews 11:6 And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.