

Building Christian Character

From Comfort to Character

Abraham: A Portrait Of Obedience

This series is not just about characters from the Old Testament. It's about the character God wants to develop in each of us to make who He created us to be. God is far more interested in our character than in our comfort. He isn't going to allow us to stay in our comfort zone and just glide through life. He's going to ask us to step outside of our comfort zone so He can grow our character. He's working in the lives of His children to shape us more and more into the likeness of His Son, Jesus. And an important aspect of Christ-like character is obedience. If you develop Faith, you will find it easier to be obedient.

One Old Testament person who illustrates obedience is Abraham. Time after time, God called Abraham to obey and step outside his comfort zone. And time after time, Abraham obeyed and stepped outside of his comfort zone and God blessed him as a result. Now, Abraham didn't always get it right. But when he did, God blessed him.

Today, we're going to focus on the beginning of Abraham's journey with God, when Abraham first stepped out of his comfort zone to obey God in a big way. In Genesis 12:1-4a, where we read of God calling Abraham to leave his homeland to go to the land of promise, we have a beautiful lesson about the requirements and rewards for obeying God.

When Billy Graham first started preaching, he was confused and had some doubts about God's Word. While praying one morning, got down on one knee at this monument

and said, "Lord, I don't understand all that is in this BOOK, and there are a lot of different passages that I have my doubts about.... But, You say it's Your Word, so by faith, I'm going to accept it as my authority and live it". That prayer proved to be the turning point of his life! From that moment on God began to use Him in amazing ways.

- I. The requirements for obeying God - v. 1
 - A. A willingness to sacrifice - v. 1a
 1. Even as Abraham willingly sacrificed his country, his people, and his father's household, we must be willing to sacrifice to obey God.
 - a. "One can't go with God and stay where they are." - Henry Blackaby
 2. Obedience always requires sacrifice.
 - a. It will always require the sacrifice of getting out of our comfort zone.
 - b. Other times, it may require more, like sacrificing something or someone we hold dear.
 - c. Obedience always costs. It can cost time; friends; or money. But there's a greater cost.
 - d. "It is a great deal easier to do that which God gives us to do, no matter how hard it is, than to face the responsibilities of not doing it." - Anonymous
 3. When God calls us to obey, whatever

the sacrifice, we should keep things in perspective, as missionary, David Livingstone, once put it:

4. "If a commission by an earthly king is considered an honor, how can a commission by a Heavenly King be considered a sacrifice?" - David Livingstone
5. We must learn to never refuse God anything. As the old saying goes, "Two words that never go together are "No" and "Lord."

B. A willingness to step out - v. 1b

C. As Abraham was called to a land he'd never seen, God calls us to a life of faith; which, by definition, means a life we've never known before

1. "When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the Levitical priests carrying it, you are to move out from your positions and follow it.
2. Then you will know which way to go, since you have never been this way before. But keep a distance of about two thousand cubits between you and the ark; do not go near it." Joshua told the people, "Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do amazing things among you."
- Joshua 3:3-5 (NIV)

D. If the people were to experience God doing amazing things among them, they had obey the call of God and step out by faith in obedience. The same is true for us.

1. In his book "Run with the Horses," Eugene Peterson tells how he saw a family of birds teaching their young to fly. Three young swallows were perched on a dead branch that stretched out over a lake. One adult swallow got alongside the chicks and started shoving them out toward the end of the branch, pushing, pushing, pushing until the end one fell off. Then somewhere between the branch and the water below, the wings started working, and the fledgling was off on his own.
2. The adult swallow then repeated this tactic again, pushing, pushing, pushing until the next young bird fell off and had its first flight.
3. The third young swallow was determined not to be bullied. When the parent swallow came pushing, pushing, pushing, the young bird refused to let go. He even hung upside down on the branch hoping not to be bullied off.
4. The parent bird was without mercy. He pecked at the desperately clinging claws until it was more painful for the poor chick to hang on than risk the insecurities of flying. The grip was released, and the inexperienced wings began pumping. The mature swallow knew what the chick did not--that it would fly, that there was no danger in

making it do what it was perfectly designed to do.

5. Birds have feet and can walk. Birds have claws and can grasp a branch securely. But flying is what they were designed to do, and not until they fly are they living at their best, graceful and beautiful and free.
6. In the same way that God created swallows to fly, so He created us to follow His commands and laws. We are not really free until we do what God has made us to do. Only in obedience are we living at our best; only in obedience will we be graceful, beautiful and free.
7. "We should never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God." - Anonymous

II. The rewards for obedience - vs. 2-3

A. We will be blessed - vs. 2a; 3a

1. God promised to bless Abraham's obedience, and He will bless ours.
2. God will bless you for doing it." - James 1:25 (NLT)

B. How frustrated God must be by our lack of obedience!

1. Next to the person who does not pay his bill, the doctor's most annoying patient is the one who refuses to follow orders. In an article appearing in U.S. News and World Report, entitled, "When You Don't Follow Your Doctor's Orders," we are told that an

estimated \$300 billion is wasted each year in the U.S. because patients don't follow their prescribed treatment regimens, which lands many people in the ER or in prolonged hospital stays.

2. I used to have problems getting my son to clean his room. I would insist that he, "Do it now," and he would always agree to do so, but then he wouldn't follow through – at least, not right way. After high school, he joined the Marine Corps, which is where he is now. When he and I were on the plane together coming home for his leave after Boot Camp, he said to me, "My life makes sense now, Dad. Everything you said and did when I was growing up now makes sense. I really, really understand." "Oh yeah, Dad," he added. "I learned what 'now' means."
3. The young man had waited for this moment for many months even years. He had practiced and practiced. It was his premiere appearance as a concert violinist. The audience heard much about his amazing talent, and they packed out the prestigious concert hall to hear him. They weren't disappointed. In fact, his masterful playing brought them to their feet for a thunderous standing ovation at the end of the concert. But the eyes of that

young man were not on the cheering crowd. Instead he looked to the balcony. There sat an old man. The violinist stood stock still and waited with intense emotion. At that moment, the old man in the balcony shook his and smiled approval. You see, the old man in the balcony was the violinist' master teacher. The young violinist thought nothing of the cheering masses but waited for the approval of his master.

So my friends, I call you, to live for the approval of the master.

III. We will be a blessing - vs. 2b; 3b

A. Abraham was told that through his obedience to God, he would be a blessing to others.

1. Likewise, of we seek to live a life of obedience to God, we will bless others, especially as they see Christ at work through us and are pointed to the Savior! This is our calling and ultimate reason for being in this world as Children of God.
2. In the eleventh century, King Henry III of Bavaria grew tired of court life and the pressures of being a monarch. He made application to Prior Richard at a local monastery, asking to be accepted as a contemplative and spend the rest of his life in the monastery. "Your Majesty," said Prior Richard, "do you understand that the pledge here is one of obedience? That will

be hard because you have been a king." "I understand," said Henry. "The rest of my life I will be obedient to you, as Christ leads you." "Then I will tell you what to do," said Prior Richard. "Go back to your throne and serve faithfully in the place where God has put you."

3. When King Henry died, a statement was written: "The King learned to rule by being obedient."
4. When we tire of our roles and responsibilities, it helps to remember God has planted us in a certain place and told us to be a good accountant or teacher or mother or father. Christ expects us to be faithful where he puts us, and when he returns, we'll rule together with him.
5. How do we fulfill our call as God's children to be lights in a dark world and point others to Christ? How are we to be a blessing to them in this way? Through living a life of unquestioned obedience to God.
6. "Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, 'children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.' Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky." - Philippians 2:14-15 (NIV)
7. Roger Staubach who led the Dallas

Cowboys to the World Championship in '71 admitted that his position as a quarterback who didn't call his own signals was a source of trial for him. Coach Landry sent in every play. He told Roger when to pass, when to run and only in emergency situations could he change the play (and he had better be right!). Even though Roger considered coach Landry to have a "genius mind" when it came to football strategy, pride said that he should be able to run his own team.

Roger later said, "I faced up to the issue of obedience. Once I learned to obey there was harmony, fulfillment, and victory."

Conclusion: The Associated Press ran a story of humorous excuses sent into Leesville High School, in Louisiana. They were compiled by the Assistant Principal, Richard Carter. Some were likely made up by students, while others might well have been written by the parent. The students were given the anonymous names of Mary or Fred. Here are some of the funniest:

"My son is under the doctor's care and should not take P.E. today. Please execute him."

"Please excuse Mary for being absent. She was sick and I had her shot."

"Mary could not come to school today because she was bothered by very close veins."

"Fred has an acre in his side."

And a most generic excuse:

"Please excuse Fred for being. It was his father's fault."

I know you would agree with me that some of those excuses are wild! But so also are many of the excuses we give as to why we do not obey God.

As we began today's message, we pointed out that Abraham didn't always get obedience right. When he did obey as he was called to, he was blessed; when he didn't obey, his life became a mess.

The choice is ours today. To obey or not to obey? To be blessed or to make life a mess?

Which choice are you making? Which choice will you make?

"Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it." - Luke 11:28 (NIV)

In 1634 renowned Dutch painter Rembrandt painted a great work of art that depicted Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. The painting ("The Sacrifice of Abraham") captures perfectly how the Lord intervenes to stop Abraham from slaying his son Isaac.

Isaac's eyes did not meet his father's eyes. He was lying on the ground, his arms bound behind his back and his eyes covered by his father's left hand, but his head was thrown back revealing the neck. Isaac's curled right leg was completely relaxed while the other curled leg was ready to kick off.

The most fascinating part of Rembrandt's drawing was the activity on Abraham's right hand. Abraham had raised his right hand to strike the boy, but an angel's hand grabbed hold of his hand. As a result the knife barely fell out of his hands on its way to the ground. The angel's right hand had such a tight grip on Abraham's hand that Abraham was forced to drop the knife out of his hands.

The angel held his left hand up as if to signal for Abraham

to stop what he was doing. The angel's eyes were most tricky. He was looking intensely at Abraham as he gripped him by the wrist and, at the same time, looking at the boy to see if he was alright.

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- I. The requirements for _____ God
 - A. A willingness to _____.
 - B. A willingness to _____ out
 - C. As Abraham was called to a land he'd never seen, God calls us to a life of _____.

- II. The _____ for obedience
 - A. We will be _____.
 - B. How frustrated God must be by our _____ of obedience!

- III. We will be a _____ .
 - A. Abraham was told that _____ his obedience to God, he would be a blessing to others.