

FAITH TO OBEY

By

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It is hard to imagine anything as horrible as human sacrifice. The Israelites received the condemnation of Yahweh for following the pagan practice of sacrificing children to Baal and Moloch. But it was God who actually commanded his servant Abraham to offer his own son Isaac on the altar of sacrifice. To make it an even greater challenge, if possible, Isaac was Abraham's future and the very goal of his life. God had promised them a son when Abraham and Sara considered themselves as good as dead so far as children were concerned. Yet "against hope Abraham believed in hope" and Isaac was born as promised.

God made it clear that the purpose of the command to slay Isaac was a test (Gen. 22:1), and as difficult as it was, Abraham passed the test. He had his arm raised and ready to plunge the knife into his precious son, when an angel of Yahweh spoke: "Lay not your hand upon the lad, neither do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing that you have not withheld your son, your only son from me" (Gen. 22:12).

We ask, "How could anyone, especially a man like Abraham, kill his own son?" The Hebrew letter gives the answer: "By faith Abraham, being tried, offered up Isaac: yea, he that gladly had received the promise was offering up his only begotten son; even he to whom it was said, In Isaac shall thy seed be called: accounting that God is able to raise up, even from the dead; from whence he also in a figure did receive him back" (Heb.1 1:19; Gen.22:17).

Abraham was able to pass the inhuman test only because of his absolute faith in God's promise that it would be through Isaac that God would multiply his seed. Such is the relation of faith and obedience: **faith makes obedience possible and obedience is the result of and the proof of faith.**

Many examples are given in Hebrews, chapter 11: *By faith* Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice... *By faith* Enoch...had been well pleasing unto God. *By faith* Noah...moved with godly fear, prepared an ark... *By faith* Moses... Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the list could go on of those who "through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, waxed mighty in war, turned to flight armies of aliens" (Heb. 11:17-34).

The point in these examples is that because of their faith these people were obedient to the Father, in spite of the extreme demands made upon them. "By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed..." The message is clear: If you have faith in God, you will obey Him. The reverse is true, that if you do not obey, it is proof that you do not have faith. "Even so faith, if it have not works, is dead in itself" (James 2:17).

There are other examples in the New Testament. The wealthy young ruler of Mark 10 was greatly impressed with Jesus, and desired the life everlasting of which Jesus spoke. Jesus gave him a direct command “go, sell whatsoever thou has, and give to the poor, and thou shall have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me.” He went away sadly. He apparently believed that there was something to what Jesus preached, and that there is such a thing as eternal life, but he did not believe in Jesus’ promise enough to obey his command. It is one thing to “follow Jesus,” but quite another to give all your money and possessions to people you don’t know, people that might squander it foolishly, people who do not deserve it, leaving yourself with none of the comfort and security that money can buy. Such an act of faith would have branded this young man as a fanatic, a religious nut.

What if Abraham had considered God’s commands in the light of popular opinion? To all the world he would be seen as a heartless evil monster that murdered his own son. Not only would he be hated by his neighbors and ostracized from society, but also he would be despised and feared by his wife. Faith means that the only consideration in obedience is that we please God, not man, and God will also bestow the reward. Obedience is undermined by the popular teaching that salvation is by faith alone, that all one has to do is to say a prayer and immediately his sins are forgiven and he is safely in the fold of the redeemed. There is such a fear that someone might attribute his salvation to his own efforts, that he is assured that nothing at all is required of him. It is a fact that salvation is a gift; no one can earn it by any amount of works. It is also a fact that obedience to God’s commands in no way annuls the grace of God in granting forgiveness and eternal life.

Many theologians, beginning with Augustine and reinforced by Luther, have insisted that there is a conflict between the grace of God that brings us salvation and the obedience of man in receiving that salvation. The examples of conversion in the book of Acts show that instead of a conflict, these two principles are in harmony. After Peter, who had the keys to the kingdom, had preached the gospel to the crowd at Pentecost, they asked, “What shall we do?” He answered, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Who can deny that their receiving the grace of God was conditioned upon their obedience? They did nothing to earn salvation, but their obedience was required in order to receive it.

A number of “proof texts” can be lined up on either side of this issue. The Bible says that “by grace you have been saved, through faith, and that not of ourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works” (Eph. 2:8-9). It also says, “You see then how that by works a man is justified and not by faith alone” (James 2:24). In reconciling these verses it might help to go back almost 2000 years and see how the early Christians interpreted them. By “early” Christians I mean those of the first and second centuries, people who were either companions of or at least contemporaries of John, Peter, and Paul.

Clement of Rome (30-100) was a disciple of Peter and Paul. He wrote, “It is necessary, therefore, that we be prompt in the practice of good works. For He forewarns us, “behold the Lord comes and His reward is before His face, to render to every man according to his works.”

Polycarp, (69-156) was a companion of the apostle of John. He wrote, “He who raised Him up from the dead will also raise us up – if we do His will and walk in His commandments and love what He loved, keeping ourselves from all unrighteousness.”

The letter of Barnabas states: “He who keeps these (commandments) will be glorified in the kingdom of God; but he who chooses other things will be destroyed with his works.”

Hermas, perhaps a contemporary of the apostle John, wrote, “only those who fear the Lord and keep His commandments have life with God. But as to those who do not keep His commandments, there is no life in them.” The same belief is found in the writings of Justin Martyr, who was martyred about 165.

These are only the expressions of men, but men who were much closer to those taught by Jesus and the apostles than were Luther and Calvin, who brought the “faith only” doctrine into the Reformation and thus into the modern churches.

The undeniable connection between faith and obedience is prominent in the New Testament. Luke wrote, “A great company of the priests were obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7). Paul wrote of “the obedience of faith” (Rom.1:5; 16:26), and “obedience of righteousness” (Rom. 6: 16). He also wrote that “them that obey not the gospel of our Lord” will suffer destruction. (2 Thess.1:8-9)

Peter wrote, “Seeing you have purified your souls in your obedience to the truth unto unfeigned love of the brethren, love one another from the heart fervently.” (1 Pet. 1:22) This sounds as though they did more than utter a prayer for their purification. In fact, there is no record of anyone being told to pray to receive salvation; rather, the specific terms of accepting God’s grace are given by Jesus: “He that believes and is baptized shall be saved,” and by Peter, “Repent and be baptized” (Mark 16:15; Acts 2:38).

Meeting these terms in no sense constitutes “works.” Neither does it add or take away from God’s marvelous grace. We can never be good enough to deserve forgiveness. We can never atone for our sins, for “The wages of sin is death; but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23). The slate is wiped clean only through God’s grace and the death of Jesus His son. Eternal life remains a gift, but God promises it only to those who meet His terms in obedience. As the hymn goes:

“Trust and obey, for there’s no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.”

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