

## What Abraham Taught Us about Faith

*It is stated in the Bible that we are saved through faith and not through the law, but does that mean we are not to keep the law of God—the Ten Commandments? Is walking by faith a matter of having only a blind trust in God, while ignoring the significance of the law in defining our reconciliation with God?*

The subject of faith is little understood even by most professing Christians. Even when people fall back on Scripture for the definitive answer as to what faith is it seems that most still can't understand it or explain it well. However, one way to better understand the subject of faith is to review examples of those individuals who lived by faith as recorded in the Bible, and a particular example for us is the Patriarch Abraham.

Abraham has been considered to be the “father of the faithful,” and by looking at his life we can learn something important about faith, and that something is the significant and meaningful relationship between God's will and the law of God—that is to say the Ten Commandments.

Now, God made it known to Abraham that he was to leave his homeland in Ur of the Chaldees. So he, along with some of his relatives, departed for the region of Harran where some of his relatives chose to remain, while Abraham and his wife Sarah continued to move into the region of Canaan. From the biblical perspective, we see that the nature of the promises given to Abraham, and perhaps the curses pronounced upon Canaan by Noah, indicates to us that God was in support of Abraham's heirs supplanting some of the descendants of Canaan from their lands in that region of the world (Ex. 33.2).

Bringing us then to an interesting part of the story regarding Abraham.

We find that Abraham was eventually confronted with a most unusual circumstance and trial, as God had commanded him to sacrifice the only heir of the promises, his son Isaac. In this severe trial Abraham was given what appeared to be a conflicting choice between God's will and God's law, knowing that it is indeed God's will that we keep his law—the Ten Commandments.

Making us think then that it is difficult sometimes to understand what the right thing to do is when confronted with opposing views or situations where both seem equally as good or right. Sometimes that's how it seems with God's will and God's law.

Nonetheless, it was Abraham who sorted out the answer for us so that we can understand the relationship between the law of God and the will of God.

Now, God had promised Abraham a son out of whose lineage would arise many nations over time that would influence the entire world. This promise began to be fulfilled in his son, Isaac, and as we see from the story of Abraham, he undoubtedly trusted God to fulfill what was a direct and clear promise from God.

Then, in what was certainly tragic news to Abraham, God commanded him to sacrifice his only son—the heir of the promises—promises that included a landed inheritance and a lineage in which a savior would be born for the sake of giving us a way to eternal life.

So, Abraham was faced with a dilemma.

Was God asking Abraham to stand in opposition to the law—the very law that God had given to him? Does this mean that if Abraham had sacrificed his only son that it

would not have been murder according to the law of God?

Well, according to the law of God it would have been murder, noting that it is specifically stated as such in the Ten Commandments. Therefore, the taking of human life, whether we believe it is warranted or not, is defined by the law as murder, and as it is stated without qualifications or exceptions, it should lead professing Christians to challenge their views about God's law and recognize how many have watered down the application of this law.

In the case of Abraham, he knew that God was not giving this command to him without meaning what he said, otherwise God would have been lying to Abraham.

Consequently, it appeared that God was directing Abraham to break God's own law—the same law that measured Abraham's obedience to God.

However, Abraham had faith to believe God, and it was accounted as righteousness to him, and so what Abraham demonstrated in his life was that he knew that the law of God was subject to the will of God. It didn't really matter if Abraham knew that Isaac could be resurrected, noting that this issue is not really relevant because what matters is that Abraham was asked to perform an action contrary to the law of God. (It is unfortunate that through the centuries it has too often been Christians who have subjected the law to their own will to make provisions for circumstances that might occur to save themselves, and also that they might appear justified in their actions before God.)

Now, Abraham could have mounted a legal defense and used obedience to the law as an argument against God's command to sacrifice his son, Isaac. He could have quoted the law to God and used the law to justify his disobedience to God's direct command, but as we know from the story

Abraham did not disobey the command from God.

Bringing us to say that Abraham understood the relationship of God's will to the law, and it was in the will of God that Abraham trusted when he prepared to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Thereby, Abraham walked by faith in his obedience—not rejecting the law of God—and trusted in God to make it possible to fulfill the law in this trial. And, so we read that the promises were given to him: “because that Abraham obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws” (Gen. 26:5).

What we begin to learn from this situation regarding Abraham is how law and faith can work in harmony to accomplish the will of God, which allowed the Apostle Paul to say that “not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified,” and this law that Paul is referring to is without question the Ten Commandments (Rom. 2:13).

Allowing us then to conclude that the law of God gives direction to the walk of faith, which then becomes the measure of our obedience or disobedience to God, just as it was for Abraham. Meaning that the “walk by faith” is not without guidance, and that guidance is the law of God, and the Apostle Paul made this clear when he stated that “by the law is the knowledge of sin,” and that tells us which way we are to walk, and which way we are not to walk, when we walk by faith (Rom. 3:20).

Therefore, faith is a trust in God—in his words—that makes us able to walk this way of life as defined by the Ten Commandments.

Also, it is our agreement with and acceptance of the Ten Commandments that—in part—gives us the same mind as the Christ, and by being of the same mind we see that the commandments of God give us the criteria that defines our reconciliation with God. Realizing, of course, that reconciliation is not

an ambiguous term, for the simple reason that there must be something upon which we agree with God that determines in what way we are to be reconciled.

It is as the prophet Amos asked: “Can two walk together, except they be agreed?” Therefore, one is only reconciled with someone else when both agree on the same path—not with each other—and that path is established by the law in terms of our reconciliation with God (Amos 3:3).

Now, there are those who claim that if we keep the commandments of God we are somehow choosing to earn our own salvation, and this view comes from an erroneous interpretation of the phrase “works of the law,” or “deeds of the law,” as found in the writings of the Apostle Paul.

The unfortunate result has been that some “scholars” have claimed, for example, that both the Sabbath observance (God’s law), and circumcision (God’s will) are to be considered “works” of the law, ignoring the biblical fact that Sabbath observance is not a work, it is the law, and circumcision was an ordinance established by God’s directive for the family of Abraham. This distinction was also made clear at what some call the “Jerusalem Conference,” which dealt with the issue of circumcision, among other issues, as it pertained to the Gentiles. But, in any case, the subjects covered in this conference had nothing to do with “precepts” of the law, which were predominantly functionary issues related to the Temple. (Jesus addressed some of these “works” when he condemned the exaggerated meaning that had been placed upon the “washing” of cups and pots (Mk. 7:4,8; Acts 15:1-21).)

So, let’s look at this a little more.

During Jesus’ ministry the Pharisees, and sometimes the lawyers and scribes, tried to place Jesus’ actions in conflict with the law of God, and by their trickery they attempted to

trap Jesus in an argument that pitted God’s will against the law of God.

Giving them a reason to condemn Jesus (Lk. 6:7).

So, in confronting the Pharisees Jesus asked a question: “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath day?” (Lk. 14:3.)

Here we can reason from Jesus’ question that there appears to be a difference between God’s will (healing) and the law of God (Sabbath observance). Noting that Jesus saw the will of God regarding healing to be what he should do on the Sabbath, while not negating the legal requirement set forth in the stipulations of the covenant—with the stipulations being the Ten Commandments.

However, in the minds of the Pharisees this was a breaking of the law, which was hypocrisy on their part because as Jesus had pointed out they were willing to take care of their own animals and even circumcise on the Sabbath day (Jn. 7:22-23).

Jesus knew full well the position of the Pharisees. They were the product of Israel’s declining commonwealth, and the inheritors of Moses’ authoritative position regarding legal issues in Israel and the Mosaic law. Their troubles and conflicts and desires for survival caused them to place the law in such esteem, that it became greater than the will of God in their minds, which expectedly happens when individuals place an emphasis on their own due diligence in keeping the law of God.

In a sense, such individuals become the judge of their own righteousness, and assume that this has some leverage with God.

Nevertheless, it can be said that the Pharisees recognized the legal difference in the Ten Commandments in regard to how they related to the body of legal work that composed the law of Moses.

What they didn't recognize was that Jesus' actions of faith, wherein God—who was in Jesus—did the actual healing on the Sabbath day (Jn. 5:30; Acts 2:22; II Cor. 5:19).

Now, it should be understood that we are not to assume to know God's will beyond the guidance of Scripture in order to justify ourselves in how we might subject the law of God to our own will, which has unfortunately been a common practice in professing Christianity. Meaning that one does not assume that something is "good" on personal merits, which then allows us to think that it is alright to break a law of God.

And this is revealing.

Because what we see in Abraham's decision to follow the will of God, and not break the law, shows that there is a relationship between the will of God and the law of God that can only be made to work through faith in God.

We see this also in the life of Jesus.

Noting, importantly, that the examples of Abraham and Jesus help us to understand how to walk by faith, and by doing so they define the notion of "grace" from God's perspective and how we see it manifested in our lives.

Let's see how this works.

Now, there came a time when Jesus was confronted by a man stricken with palsy, and he said to this person: "Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee" (Mk. 9:2).

When the Scribes heard Jesus say this they thought in their own minds that this was an act of blasphemy because they couldn't accept that Jesus would express the will of God to forgive sin, and they could not accept that Jesus' statement subjected the law of God to God's will in regard to this man's illness so that he might be healed.

The implication of Jesus' statement regarding sins that are forgiven, and healing, are understood in that our healing from God—respective to Jesus' sacrifice—is done by imputing our illness to the body of the Christ, just as our sins are imputed to the sacrifice of the Christ. Thus, we have the concept of Jesus "bearing" our sicknesses, which means that we must go to God and ask to have our illness removed from us in a manner similar to asking God to forgive us of our sins, showing that both can be imputed to the complete sacrifice of Jesus (Mt. 8:17; I Pt. 2:24). (The memorial to Jesus our Passover, which according to Scripture is to be observed annually on the same day that he was sacrificed, reflects this in the ceremony of the bread and wine (I Cor. 11:24).)

This then gives us reason to see that faith is manifested as trust in the will of God, not in the law of God.

Summarily, we could then say that the law of God is subject to the will of God, and because of this relationship it makes it possible for us to be forgiven of our sins, as well as being healed of our illnesses, for such is the meaning attributed to the sacrifice of Jesus.

This was understood in the choice made by Abraham regarding Isaac.

We see the same choice being made in the examples set by Jesus.

Now, it would seem bold to say that all laws are subject to God's will, but we have to remember who it was that created the concept of law in the first place. Even the laws found in God's physical creation are subject to his will.

Everyone knows that a mountain cannot fly. There are laws in place in nature that effectually keep a mountain where it is. The mountain is subject to the laws of nature, such as the law of gravity, and the laws of aerodynamics. These laws confirm for us the

absolute certainty that mountains cannot be loosed from their moorings and be cast into the sea (Mt. 21:21).

The only possible way for a mountain to rise up and drop into the sea is for the laws of nature to be made subject to the will of God. In other words, the laws of nature are not gone or removed by faith, they are simply made subject to God's will by faith in order to fulfill the will of God.

Jesus, on several occasions, used faith to subject the laws of nature on behalf of other people. There is the example of his disciples who were caught in a raging storm at sea. Experienced fisherman as they were, they knew that they would perish if the storm did not stop. It was an undeniable conclusion.

Jesus knew what was happening, and he walked out on the water to reach his disciples, and nearly passed them by, and when he entered the ship the winds became calm again. Is it any wonder that they were overwhelmed by these events?

By Jesus' faith, and the spirit of God that was in him, the laws of nature, no matter how powerful, were made subject to the will of God.

We find another example when Jesus resurrected Lazarus from the dead. Everyone knew that the laws of nature were in effect, and they concluded correctly that these laws could not be changed. Lazarus was dead. Yet, Lazarus was given life again.

It is important to grasp the importance of this matter in terms of healing from the biblical perspective where healing requires that the laws of nature become subject to God's will. This is done by faith—a trust in God—that he will perform what he promised regardless of the laws of nature. For viruses and other diseases conform to laws, even though they are destructive in nature.

There is an example of this when Jesus healed a blind man. Before he was healed,

Jesus asked the question, "Do you believe I am able to do this?" He was asking the man if he believed that the will of God could subject the laws of nature. The man believed this and he was healed.

Now, in Christianity it is believed that to a greater or lesser degree that the laws of God are no longer in effect because of faith, and that some other form of spiritual law has been derived from people's aimless thinking in order to take the place of the Ten Commandments. This is an erroneous interpretation of what the Apostle Paul wrote to the churches when he stated that: "sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace. What then? shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid (Rom. 6:14-16).

In this statement the context is the "dominion" of sin that is defined by the law, and it is by grace—the imputing of our sins to Jesus's sacrifice upon repentance of breaking the law—that keeps it from having dominion over us. Yet, the law remains to define the sin that can hold this dominion, noting also that "grace" does not give us room to cast the law aside because Paul asks, "shall we sin," which is to break the law, and Paul answers his own question by stating "God forbid."

Now, for many people, grace is defined as "room for error," or it is defined in a way that assumes we can subject the law to our own will—often embracing the traditions of men—and in this context some people assume that God will overlook our shortcomings of breaking the law.

But he does not.

The law never goes away, and it does not forgive us or justify us of sin, and our efforts and dutifulness in keeping it will not earn us salvation. But, through repentance and obedience to the law of God, one can be forgiven of their sins, and the penalty, which

is death, may be removed because that price was paid by the sacrifice of Jesus.

Simply, the will of God subjects the law of God so that our sins can be imputed to Jesus's sacrifice (who did not sin), otherwise the sin would remain with us, and we would be kept by sin—as defined by the law—from receiving eternal life.

Thus, the biblical definition of “grace” is defined by the will of God to act in a way according to the sacrifice of Jesus to remove our sins without removing the law of God. Or, we could say that “grace” is defined as God's willingness to ascribe our law breaking to Jesus, so that the penalty of law breaking does not remain upon us, noting that Jesus accepted the penalty of law breaking in our stead, but what he bore on the stake was our law breaking—our sins—and because he did not sin himself our sins had to be imputed to him.

Simply, God subjects the law to his will—not removing it—and upon our repentance and effort to keep the law, God will impute our sins to Jesus.

That is the grace of God.

Otherwise, the law has the power over us to prevent us from receiving eternal life.

Then what about the laws of man, are they also subject to God's will?

Most certainly.

There have been laws made that condemned people to be thrown into fiery furnaces and into lions' dens, and there are many examples in Scripture that demonstrate God's willingness to intervene in the laws of humankind as it relates to his purpose, which brings us to the subject of the promises of God.

When we look into the Bible, we don't readily see phrases or words that say, “I promise” to do this or that, and Scripture often does not

use a language that reflects the exact situation we find ourselves in. What we have to do is see the evidence in the lives of people like Abraham, and also Jesus, as they understood the relationship between God's will and the law of God.

From this perspective, the Bible is filled with promises for us if we obey God.

Let's examine a statement from the writings of the Apostle John.

John wrote: “Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth” (III Jn. 2).


This is only a statement from John, and seemingly nothing more than his personal sentiment, and so we wonder if this is also the will of God.

First, we know that it is the will of God for the simple reason that John would not express a personal belief or value contrary to the will of God. Second, it becomes a promise to us when we ask God to help us with these things, knowing that they are promised to us according to our keeping of the law of God (Ps. 1:1-3). Noting also that God's promises are also dependent on when and how he chooses to fulfill what he has promised us, and we must exercise faith until the promises are fulfilled.

Consider again the situation of Abraham. His son was a son of promise. Otherwise, Abraham would most certainly have not had a son by Sarah. Also consider the fact that Sarah and Isaac were both recipients of promises as well.

This was a situation that brought the Apostle Paul to address the issue of whether or not the law had the power to nullify these promises given to Abraham, given that his descendants were removed from there landed inheritance in Canaan because they broke the covenant and broke the law of God.

Nonetheless, Paul made it clear that God would fulfill these promises, and that was not done by removing the law of God, but rather by making the law of God subject to the will of God. The peoples of Israel lost out on their inheritance because of disobedience to the law, but upon repentance and choosing to obey God they also can be forgiven of their sins—imputed to Jesus—and they too can receive the promise of eternal life—a promise that was also extended beyond the family of Abraham.

Summarily, then, it was in these promises that Abraham had looked to when he was asked to sacrifice his son, and he knew that God would answer in a way that would keep him from breaking the law of God (Gen. 22:5). Consequently, by trusting in God Abraham knew that he would be able to fulfill the law, which means that faith is a trust in the will of God that makes it possible to keep the law of God, which is a lesson we learn from the faith of Abraham.   
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