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Abraham and Isaac

A SPECIAL KIND OF TEST

HAVE YOU EVER RECEIVED mail that isn't addressed to you? You take it out of your mailbox and read that the address doesn't have your name on it. It just says "Occupant." You get that piece of mail by virtue of you being the "occupant" of that home. Trials are a lot like that. Just by virtue of being an occupant on this planet in a fallen world, we will face trials.

Of course, no one likes a trial. No one wakes up in the morning, stretches, and says, "Ah, what a beautiful day for a trial! I think I'd like to have a trial today!" That would be an unusual person who would do something like that. Yet no matter how much we want to avoid trials in our lives, trials are inevitable. No one is immune to trials.

Trials are adverse circumstances that God allows in our lives to

both identify where we are spiritually as well as to prepare us for where He wants us to go. There is no escaping them. You are either in a trial now, you've just come out of a trial, or you are getting ready to go into a trial. Trials are unavoidable realities of life.

But even though we all have to experience them, we can take comfort in knowing that trials must first pass through God's hands before reaching us. Nothing comes our way without first having received His divine approval. And in order to get His divine approval, there must be a divine reason for Him to approve it.

There is. God allows trials and tests in our lives in order to reveal where we are along our spiritual journey, to correct us when necessary, and to strengthen us for the journey ahead.

PULLING OUT THE TRICK BAG

A good friend of mine is an assistant football coach for the University of Texas, and he'll call me during all hours of the day or night when he's facing one of these trials. He calls me to talk through his trial, or as he puts it, the "trick bag." In fact, he calls me so much about his "trick bags" that I've now nicknamed my friend "Trick bag," and I call him that every time I see him.

A trick bag is a catch-22. It's where you find yourself stuck between a rock and a hard place. Your back is up against the wall, and no matter how hard you try, there seems to be no visible solution. The only way to get out of your scenario would be illegitimately, because there is no valid way out.

When you are in a trick bag, you feel trapped, stuck, and tired of where you are. You either don't know what to do, or you don't know how to legitimately do what you feel you need to do. You are like Israel when they faced Pharaoh on one side and the Red Sea on the other, and certain death was upon them.

A trick bag is a lose-lose deal. If it were a clear win-lose deal, then you would know how to choose and where to turn. But what do you do when you're caught between a rock and a hard place? What option do you choose when both options are bad? Have you ever been in a situation where all of the ways that you turn to are problems, and you are just trying to find the least possible problem to choose as the solution?

I've been in situations like that and it's not fun. It's about as fun as huffing and puffing on that treadmill in my doctor's office during my annual physical exam. But one thing I've learned over the years is that God has a purpose for these times in our lives. Just like my doctor is not a mean man for putting my body through all of that stress, God is not a mean God when He decrees that we go through trials.

When God wants to reveal the real condition of your heart to empower you toward His plan for your future, He puts you in one of these kinds of trials. And when God puts you in a certain kind of trial, trick bag, catch-22, or between a rock and a hard place, He is getting ready to do something significant in your life. That's the conclusion of this book, and it comes at the beginning.

This is not the typical trial that is used to develop character and reveal flaws. This trick bag signifies that there is accelerated activity about to take place in your situation.

GOD'S BLESSING THROUGH ABRAHAM

The first trick bag that we're going to look at appears in Genesis 22. It's part of the story of Abraham and his son Isaac. Earlier God had made a covenant with Abraham—theologians call this binding agreement the Abrahamic covenant. Through this covenant, God promised that He would bless Abraham and that

Abraham would also be a blessing to others.

Notice that God's covenant didn't stop at His blessing for Abraham. Rather, God's covenant went on to declare that others would be blessed through Abraham. A blessing in the Bible means to experience, enjoy, and extend the favor of God in your life.

Sometimes I get the impression that when we ask God to bless us, we forget the full definition of a blessing. We forget that God doesn't want us to be cul-de-sac Christians where all of our blessings end with us. God wants us to be a conduit Christian where all of our blessings extend through us to others.

God said clearly to Abraham, "Look toward the heavens, and count the stars. . . . So shall your descendants be. . . . In you, all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Genesis 15:5; 12:3).

God said that He was not only going to bring His favor on Abraham but that His favor on Abraham would extend out to be a blessing on others as well. God never designs our blessings to stop with us, but our blessings should always extend to others.

GOD'S MIRACLE FOR ABRAHAM AND SARAH

God's covenant with Abraham would require a miracle just to get it going. Not only were Abraham and his wife, Sarah, advanced in years when God made the promise concerning his descendants, but it would be another twenty-five years before that promise was realized. So here we have an equation that starts with "old" and then adds twenty-five years to it.

By the time Sarah was told she would have a son, both Abraham and she were not only old but also starting to get cold. The early nineties¹ is not typically considered to be the prime time of the married life, if you know what I mean. Even Sarah herself had a difficult time believing God's promise. "Sarah laughed to herself,

saying ‘After I have become old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?’” (Genesis 18:12). In other words, “Shop’s closed. This is not going to happen.”

But God is not limited by age or energy. That’s the beauty of God. He is not limited by what our finite minds can understand or even by what our physical bodies can perform. And just as God had promised, Isaac was born to Sarah as the seed of Abraham’s loins.

GOD’S AMAZING REQUEST OF ABRAHAM

A number of years later, God spoke to Abraham about his son. He did more than just speak to him, though. It actually says in Genesis 22 that God “tested” Abraham. God decided to put Abraham between a rock and a hard place—in a trick bag. He put him in a catch-22. We read:

Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.” (vv. 1–2)

Hold up. We didn’t just read that, did we? God didn’t just ask Abraham to take his only son, the son whom he loves—the son of God’s promise—and go kill him, did he? That’s a pretty harsh request to ask someone to do. That’s sticking Abraham, the man who followed God in faith all of those years, between a rock and a hard place.

God *did* ask Abraham. And now our brother Abe finds himself in the middle of a contradiction. In fact, Abraham is caught in a slew of contradictions.

Let me explain what I mean. The first kind of contradiction Abraham is in is a theological one. Get this: God had promised Abraham a son. God had said, in essence, “Abraham, I’m going to make your name great. I’m going to give you a son. He’s going to have sons. They will have sons. And you will become a great nation.” That was a promise. Take it to the bank. It was a promise from God.

Then, however, a few years later God says, in essence, “Abraham, kill that son.”

I’ve seen a few tricky situations in my life but Abraham’s trick bag tops them all. Because Abraham is now asking God, “How can my son Isaac become a great nation—as you promised me, God, if I kill him? He’s young. He’s not even married. He doesn’t have any children. And you want me to kill him?”

To which God nods His head, yes.

WOULD GOD PLAY A TRICK ON YOU?

But this book isn’t just about Abraham, although Abraham’s story is an amazing backdrop on which to see God more clearly. This book is more personal; so for a moment let’s bring our focus into the present. What about you? Have you ever felt like God is playing a trick on you? Have you ever felt like God isn’t giving you any real options, like you are stuck between a rock and a hard place? Maybe God has given you something that you thought He had promised you, and then just as soon as He gave it to you, He asked you to give it back. Something you waited, prayed, and longed for sincerely. Something good, even spiritual.

It finally showed up in your life and then in your excitement, God said, “Okay, now give it back. Let it go.” He asked that we return it . . . or kill it.

When God does something like that, it is only because there is something greater on the other side of His request. But when we are in the middle of the contradictions, it is easy to forget that. Especially when there are multiple contradictions like with Abraham.

DID GOD CONTRADICT GOD?

Not only was it a trick bag for Abraham theologically because it contradicted something God had promised, but it was a trick bag theologically because it contradicted something God had previously said not to do. How could God, who said in Genesis 9:6, “Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God He made man” now ask Abraham a mere thirteen chapters later to shed his son’s blood? God seemingly contradicted His own request. God contradicted God. When God contradicts God—what do you do? That’s a trick bag. (Did God really contradict God when he asked Abraham to sacrifice his son? We will answer this theological and ethical question in chapter 2.)

Have you ever been in a situation where it seems like what God told you in your yesterday contradicts what He is telling you in your today? Has God ever completely confused you, even though you thought you had heard Him correctly both times? I know I have been in situations like that. When this type of trial happens, it is good to remember Abraham.

Because not only were there theological contradictions facing Abraham, but there was also an emotional contradiction. God was asking Abraham to sacrifice his son, whom he loves. “He said, ‘Take now your son, your only son, whom you love . . .’” (Genesis 22:2). I can only imagine that God included this personal information in this verse saying, “whom you love” because He wanted us to know that this son was extra special to Abraham.

This trial is a matter of the heart for Abraham. This request cuts deeply into the tenderest part of Abraham's own love. This is God saying, "I know how you feel about your son Isaac, Abraham. I know that you love him more than anything else on earth because he is your only son from Sarah. Not only is he your only son from Sarah, but he is also the son of promise—the son of your future. I know all of this, Abraham. In fact, it is because I know all of this that I want you to give him back."

Sure, there is another son, Ishmael (see Genesis 16). But Abraham doesn't love Ishmael the same way that he loves Isaac, because Isaac is the son of the promise. Isaac came from the womb of Sarah. Ishmael did not.

God says to Abraham, in essence, "I want the one you are really connected to and invested in. Sacrifice him, Abraham. Give him back, Abraham. Take the knife to him, Abraham."

Abraham is facing an emotional contradiction, a trick bag.

MORE CONTRADICTIONS

Not only do we have theological contradictions and an emotional contradiction, but Abraham also experiences social and familial contradictions. What is he going to tell Sarah? What about the neighbors? What are people going to say as they gather every morning around the well and fill up their jugs? Are they going to whisper, "Hey, did you hear that Abraham killed the son of his promise?" Are they going to say that Abraham lost his mind and sabotaged his own future? That is how it would have looked from their vantage point.

Abraham is in conflict on all sides, and not because of any sin that he had committed. He is in conflict because of God.

“Your son, Abraham, your only son whom you love—I want him,” God says. “Sacrifice him.”

And guess where God is asking him to sacrifice his son Isaac? On the altar. Back in the Bible days, the altar was like church. It was the place to worship through sacrifice.

It’s nice to worship God when you’re getting everything that you want and all of your prayers are being answered, but what about those times when He’s asking you to give up what you want the most? Do you still go to church then? Do you still go to the altar?

DO WE SURRENDER ALL?

What about those times when God asks you to give back to Him what you once told him was His to have. According to Genesis 21:4, Abraham had circumcised Isaac. Circumcision was a sign of the covenant because the covenant was designed to be passed on through the family via the man. The male was circumcised to signify that he was passing on the program of God. So what Abraham had said to God when he circumcised Isaac was that he was committing Isaac to God.

It’s one thing to say, “All I have is yours, God.” It’s another thing to mean it. As long as God is not asking us to give up what is dear to us, we’re quick to say that we surrender all. But as soon as God wants it, we can become very territorial, protecting what we once had committed to Him.

Nearly everyone reading this book has been territorial toward God at one time or another. I’m guessing at some point you have found yourself in a spiritual conflict with God. You knew that God wanted you to give up something that seemed legitimate. God wanted you to turn over something that you thought He had

given you to begin with: a dream, a relationship, a desire, an ambition, a job, a family member, health, finances, or home. You knew that God was asking you to sacrifice something on His altar, but you also knew how you felt about that sacrifice and how you felt about letting it go.

And it hurt.

God doesn't always ask us to sacrifice something as literal as what we are seeing with Abraham and his son. But He does test our hearts. And it does hurt. Maybe it's not our son that He's asking for. Maybe He's asking for us to remain single longer than we had hoped, or even married longer than we desire. Maybe He's asking us to put our career on the altar, a promotion, a dream, or even a relationship. Whatever it is, God knows how to pick the very thing that will test the deepest parts of our heart.

God does this because He knows that our words alone mean very little. Just like my doctor would be a fool to take my word for how I feel every summer when I visit him, God knows that our words are superficial at best, even with good intentions. Faith only gets tested when our feet move.

ABRAHAM TAKES ACTION

So how do Abraham's feet respond in the situation of a trick bag? They respond in an uncommon way. When we read Genesis 22:3, we see a verse jam-packed with action verbs: "So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him."

Notice these words: *rose*, *saddled*, *took*, *split*, *arose*, and *went*. These are all verbs indicating an immediate response. But also notice

what verse 3 doesn't say. It doesn't tell us that Abraham is trying to bargain with God. It doesn't say that Abraham is asking God "Why?" It doesn't say that Abraham snuck a lamb in his backpack, just in case. It doesn't give us a synopsis of a debate going on. No, it just says that Abraham got up, got going, and did what God had asked him to do.

Where did Abraham find not only the strength but also the faith to follow God so quickly on such a seemingly absurd request? The question applies to us as well: Where do we find the strength and the faith to follow God when God puts us in a trick bag?

The answer comes from Abraham's own words. In verse 5 we read, "Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go over there; and we will worship and return to you.'"

Let me break it down for you. Abraham said, "Hey, boys, the son and I are going to go have some church. We're going to go up and worship and then we'll be back."

But wait a minute. Isn't that different than what God had said? God had said to take his son up to the altar and kill him. But Abraham said to the young men that he and his son were going to go to the altar, worship God, and then come back. How could Abraham have said that?

The only way Abraham could have said that was because he fully knew the power of God. Even if Abraham killed his son, Abraham knew that the God he served had promised to bless his son and his son's seed. Therefore, since that promise is true and God does not lie, Abraham knew that if he killed his son, the God he served was powerful enough to keep His promise, even if he didn't understand how.

What Abraham knew—and what you and I know—about God

determine how we respond to God when we are stuck between a rock and a hard place. That is why it is essential to know God in the good times, and to know Him well. Knowing God in times of peace is critical for helping to handle problems in the bad times. Because when you don't know God, or when you either forget or dismiss what is true about Him, then you don't know how to respond when He puts you in a trick bag.

FAITH IN THE ONE YOU BELIEVE IN

We often confuse the essence of faith. Faith is not about how much you believe. In fact, you can have all the faith in the world that your SUV is going to take off and fly you to Canada cruising at 12,000 feet in the air. But that won't change the fact that you're still going to be stuck in traffic somewhere with all four wheels firmly on the ground.

Faith is about believing that the One you believe in is believable.

The way you find out if the one you believe in is believable is by knowing and experiencing Him.

It's like when a child climbs up on the back of her daddy for a piggyback ride. She doesn't get up there and start asking herself if he can hold her or if he is going to drop her. Instead, she immediately starts asking him, "Do you have me? Do you have me?" as she wiggles and adjusts her legs into place.

By asking her daddy, "Do you have me?" she is affirming in her mind that the one she is putting her faith in is faithful. Because if he says, "Yes, I have you," and she rests up there and discovers that he really does have her, then the next time she climbs on for a piggyback ride, the questions become fewer. Enough piggyback rides later, and she doesn't even ask anymore. In fact, he can toss her up in the air or spin her around in circles and instead of sheer terror,

she giggles with excitement because she has faith that the one she believes in is believable.

But until she first climbs up onto the back of her daddy, she can say all day long that she believes that he can hold her. Saying it a thousand times won't reduce the hesitation she feels when the offer to get up there is first extended. She will never get to the point where she can experience the full pleasure of his presence until she takes that first climb of faith to discover that he is faithful.

Faith experienced is faith that is real. Faith cannot be experienced without our feet doing what we say we believe. It is an easy thing to say that you believe. It is an easy thing to feel like you believe. But faith is not situated in our feelings. Faith is situated in our feet. That's why the Bible says "we walk by faith" (see 2 Corinthians 5:7) rather than "feel by faith."

In other words, faith is validated by the steps you take; not by the butterflies that you feel. In fact, you can feel absolutely faithless and yet be entirely full of faith. Or you can feel absolutely faith-full and yet be entirely devoid of faith because your feet are not moving when God says to get up and go.

FAITH SHOWN BY OUR FEET

The measure of a person's faith is in his feet just like the measure of the health of my heart only comes on the treadmill once a year at my doctor's office. The strength of my heart during my medical exam is not determined by my words. Just like Abraham, the strength of our faith is not determined by our words, thoughts, or feelings.

Not until faith registers through actions will we know how much faith we really have. Sometimes it takes a trick bag, or getting

caught between a rock and a hard place, to give us an opportunity to put feet on our faith.

Abraham found himself in exactly that position. We'll uncover more about Abraham's faith, as well as God's uncommon response, as we move into the next chapter.

NOTE

1. Sarah was ninety years old and Abraham was ninety-nine when God announced Sarah would bear a son (Genesis 17:1, 16–17).

IN THE HARD PLACES

1. The college football coach calls a situation with no way out a “trick bag.” Why do Christians often get upset when they find themselves in a trick-bag situation?
2. Think of a trial when you felt there was no way out, when you felt you were caught between a rock and a hard place. How did you feel about the situation? What were your feelings and thoughts toward God?
3. Early in the chapter Pastor Evans says God allows adverse circumstances in our lives “to both identify where we are spiritually as well as to prepare us for where He wants us to go.” He then adds that no trial “comes our way without first having received His divine approval.” Do you believe those two statements? If so, what comfort do these statements give you?
4. Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary defines a catch-22 as “an illogical, unreasonable, or senseless situation.” What were a couple of the senseless situations Abraham faced when God told him to kill his son Isaac?
5. Read the entire story in Genesis 22. There is no record in the story that Abraham asked the question “Why?” Are you at the point where if God asked you to do something illogical, you would—without asking why?