

The Gifts, or the Giver?

by Watchman Nee

Watchman Nee's sermon explores the relationship between God as the Giver and the gifts He provides, emphasizing the importance of prioritizing God Himself over His blessings.

Topics: "Surrendering to God", "Understanding God's Gifts"

Description

Watchman Nee emphasizes the profound relationship between God as the Giver and the gifts He provides, using Abraham's journey as a case study. Abraham learned that true fruitfulness and fulfillment come from God alone, not from his own efforts or the gifts he received, such as Isaac. The sermon highlights the necessity of surrendering our attachments to God's gifts in order to maintain a close relationship with Him as our Father. Ultimately, it is through trials and tests that we come to understand God's sovereignty and the importance of prioritizing our relationship with Him over His blessings. This understanding positions us to be vessels for God's divine purpose.

Transcript

ABRAHAM had learned that God is Father. This it was that made possible his prayer for Abimelech's household. He knew that neither their troubles nor Sarah's hindered God in the least. He knew that ultimately fruitfulness depended neither on them nor on himself. It was God's gift. He could not have prayed for the people of Gerar if he had still been nursing hopes in himself in regard to his own need. He prayed a costly prayer, and the price of it was a complete abandonment of himself. It was a prayer God would answer immediately.

To know God in the closest relationship of 'our Father' is one thing. To know Him as God the Father, the Source and Originator of everything, is something more. Abraham had learned that nothing could hinder and nothing could help God. He is almighty.

We read now that Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian mocking, and that she said to Abraham 'Cast out this bondwoman and her son; for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac'. This appears like human jealousy merely, but God was speaking through Sarah. This is clear from Galatians 4. 30. Ultimately only one son can fulfil God's purpose, namely Christ.

Ishmael represents Adam, the man of the flesh. In him we are in bondage, and Paul says 'With freedom did Christ set us free: stand fast therefore, and be not entangled again in a yoke of bondage' (Galatians 5. 1). How, then, are we to act towards the flesh?

Notice first that Ishmael was not cast out until after Isaac was born and weaned. It is no use preaching against the flesh to unbelievers. They are flesh, and they possess nothing else! There must be an Isaac, a new birth. When Isaac came into his position and was recognized as the son, then Ishmael was cast out. It is Christ dwelling in us who sets us free. 'Walk by the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh. They that are of Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with the passions and the lusts thereof' (Galatians 5. 16, 24).

Now at last God's way with Abraham was complete. We come to chapter 22, and it is God's glory that here He could still test His servant. 'It came to pass after these things that God did prove Abraham.' How many of us can stand being tested yet again, when all the lessons have already been learned?

What God now demanded of Abraham was nothing less than the outright sacrifice of his son. The Old Testament story emphasizes the emotional crisis this was for Abraham personally. 'Take now thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest, even Isaac, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering.'

But-it is in the New Testament that we are shown the real costliness of this demand. Far more than mere human feelings were at issue. 'By faith Abraham, being tried, offered up Isaac: yea, he that had gladly received the promises 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 did also in a parable receive him back' (Hebrews 11. 17-19). Isaac was the son God had promised, the hope of his posterity. That was the thing at stake, namely, God's matchless purpose of love. The son was not merely a personal matter to Abraham. If this heir of the promise died, upon whom hung the entire plan of God, then what remained?

Thus it was that this third test came to Abraham, not as an individual but as a vessel of the divine purpose. For all the fullness of promise was settled upon Isaac. To sacrifice him was to sacrifice the covenant word of God. The very witness to God in the nations turned upon this lad, and he was to be given up!

'Ishmael was mine. To turn him out is reasonable; I respect that. But Isaac-he is not, in that sense, mine. He came by promise, entirely from God. I did not even ask for him; God gave him. Now He wants me to give him back! And He is not even taking him naturally by death; I must sacrifice him. In the first place I didn't want him for I had Ishmael; so why give him? Having so wonderfully given him, why not leave him? But to give him, and then to ask for him back? It is not reasonable!'

Once again Abraham must know God as Father. Isaac truly was from God. There was no problem there. The problem now was with Abraham's concern with Isaac. We must not become tied up possessively with God's gifts. Abraham had learned that God was Father in the birth of Isaac; he must learn that God is still Father after his birth. We often recognize it before Isaac comes, but when we look at Isaac-we cannot do without Isaac!

The question is, is it still God who occupies our vision, or Isaac? Before Isaac's birth, the two were one. Now they have become two representing two claims upon our attention. We think, that now Isaac is come, God's work is done and everything turns upon him. But God's promise is still with Himself, not with His gift.

Isaac can stand for many things. He represents many gifts of God's grace. Before God gives them, our hands are empty. Afterwards they are full. Sometimes God reaches out His hand to take ours in fellowship. Then we need an empty hand to put into His. But when we have received His gifts and are

nursing them to ourselves, our hands are full, and when God puts out His hand we have no empty hand for Him. We can dwell on His gifts at the neglect of Him. Often we forget that our experience is not for our life-long use. Our source of life is God, not our experience. We hold on to the experience and forget God is Father. Let go the gift and the experience, and hold on to God. Isaac can be done without, but God is eternal.

But as we have said, this matter of Isaac goes deeper. It is concerned with more than individual matters-with God's gift to us personally and with our personal experiences of Him. Isaac was intimately linked with God's will. In fact Abraham might have been led to feel that Isaac in fact represented God's will and therefore must be held on to for that reason. But at the risk of seeming to press this matter excessively we must affirm that the will of God is not bound up with any Isaac but with God Himself.

It will help us if we compare together two chapters in the New Testament, Luke 22 and John 18, which helpfully illumine this passage. In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus knelt and prayed saying, 'Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done' (Luke 22. q 2). This request of His that the cup might pass from Him does not represent fear of the Cross. We cannot doubt our Lord's courage. If martyrs have gladly died for Him through the ages, certainly their Lord did not fear crucifixion.

But there is a distinction here between what Jesus called the cup and the will. The cup was surely the work that God had sent Him to do, and this included the Cross. The will was something lying behind that, in the heart of God Himself. The cup in this passage is just one work - redemption. Jesus knew He had come for that work, even before He left heaven. Yet He had not become so bound to it that He could not let it go. There was an 'if possible' in it, and of course there were real human reasons why some other alternative might be welcome, if God so willed. But for Him there was no 'if possible' about God's will; that must be done, 'possible' or not. Right up to the night before His crucifixion, Jesus never thought, 'I must be crucified at all costs,' but only, 'I must do the will of Him that sent me.' The one is subsidiary and might possibly be changed; the other, the will of God, is something in God Himself, and must be done. Important-nay, vital as the Cross most certainly was, the Lord Jesus had not grasped it to Himself. All that mattered to Him was the Father's will, and the decision of how that will should be fulfilled remained in the Father's hands, not His.

So the cup represents the work, and the will represents God Himself. We are concerned with God Himself, not with the thing He wants us to do. With Christ the will of God was an ever-present thing, ever to be done. He was not even tied up to a single point in that will, such as the crucifixion. But when it was clear to Him that without any question the Cross was in the will of God for Him, then with equal positiveness He said to Peter-and notice that these words follow the previous ones-'The cup which the Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?' (John 18. 11). Jesus puts first things first, the Father's will before the work that that will involves.

How perverse we are! Until Isaac comes we are like Abraham; we do not want him. But once Isaac has been given we cannot do without him, and we must hold on to him. First we oppose Isaac; then we possess him. That is what man is! And that is what Moriah deals with. It was Abraham's last test.

Do we love the work God has given us to do at the expense of the Giver of it? Or is our fellowship with God the same, whether He gives or whether He withdraws our Isaac? Only as it is so can what Isaac represents be maintained upon the earth. Praise God, Abraham did not murmur at all. He did not even use

the word 'sacrifice'. He said, 'I and the lad will go yonder; and we will worship, and come again to you' (Genesis 22. 5). This experience really was worship to him.

Then it was that God could give Isaac back. The possessive bond was already broken. The attitude of Abraham's heart was, 'I dare not think too much of Isaac. I don't know what God is going to do with him.'

But out of this experience there came a further thing for Abraham; he discovered that God was not only the God of creation but also of resurrection. Hebrews 11:19 tells us that he accounted 'that God is able to raise up, even from the dead; from whence he did also in a parable receive him back'. In this also he knew God as Father, and for this too he was reckoned righteous. 'Was not Abraham our father justified by works, in that he offered up Isaac his son upon the altar? Thou seest that faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect; and the scripture was fulfilled which saith, And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned unto him for righteousness; and he was called the friend of God' (James 2. 21-23). Everything that is really of value to us, even the work God gives us, and even our knowledge of God's will, must go through death to resurrection. In resurrection we know it to be something so miraculously of God that we can never again take it possessively into our hands. Resurrection puts it out of our reach. Isaac is born in my home, but he dwells in God's. He is not mine, I cannot hold him. God has become everything. This accords with the opening words of God's promise to Abraham there in the mount. 'By myself have I sworn, saith the Lord' (22. 26). There is nothing greater than that.

The fully developed promise that follows is very wonderful. 'Because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son: . . . in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice.' Abraham's call was firstly for the land, secondly for the people of God, and now, thirdly, for all 'the nations of the earth'.

Through deep experience Abraham has come to know God, not just as the Giver of gifts but as the Father, the Source of everything. It was this that qualified him to be the father of them that believe. It was this that fitted him to be God's vessel in the divine programme of recovery.

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