

(Beauty for Ashes) 3. the Pathway to the Christ-Life (II) : Being Emptied

by Zac Poonen

Zac Poonen's sermon emphasizes the necessity of being emptied of self to allow Christ to work through us, exemplified through the life of Abraham.

Scripture: Philippians 2:5

Topics: "Faith and Worship", "Self-Emptying"

Description

Zac Poonen emphasizes the necessity of being emptied of self to truly embrace the Christ-life, drawing parallels between the lives of Paul and Abraham. He illustrates that true faith and worship require a relinquishing of self-sufficiency, as seen in Abraham's journey of trusting God for a son and his willingness to sacrifice Isaac. Poonen highlights that God's blessings are not just for personal gain but are meant to flow through us to others, and that our service must stem from dependence on the Holy Spirit rather than human effort. The sermon calls believers to recognize their impotence without God and to offer everything, including their most cherished gifts, back to Him in worship. Ultimately, Poonen challenges the congregation to embrace the cross as the pathway to spiritual power and fulfillment in their lives.

Transcript

Being Emptied

The way of the cross involves not only being broken but also being emptied.

"It is no longer I", said Paul. He had allowed himself to be emptied of the "I", so that Christ might live and rule in him. Even Jesus emptied Himself when He came down from the Throne of God to the awful depths of the cross (Philippians 2:5-8). The cross will mean the same in our lives as it did to Jesus and to Paul.

We shall look at the life of Abraham in this chapter, to see what it means to be emptied. In James 2:23, Abraham is called "the friend of God". He was a type of those who, in the New Testament age, would be called the friends of God. Jesus told His disciples, just before He went to the cross, "You are My friends if you obey Me (as Abraham did). I no longer call you slaves, for a master does not confide in His slaves; now you are My friends, proved by the fact that I have told you everything the Father told Me" (John 15:14, 15 - LB).

God calls us in this New Testament age to be, not just His servants but His friends - entering into His secret counsels and understanding the hidden mysteries of His Word. Abraham was such a friend. God revealed His secrets to him (Genesis 18:17-19).

God blessed Abraham mightily. And we are told that "all who trust in Christ [can] share the same blessing Abraham received" (Galatians 3:9 - LB). What was the blessing with which God blessed Abraham. God's promise to Abraham was, "I will bless you" (Genesis 12:2). We saw in the last chapter what it means to be blessed of God. But God's promise to Abraham did not end with "I will bless you." He went on to say, "....and you will be a blessing to others." This was God's full purpose for Abraham and is His purpose for us today. We are not only to be blessed but also to be channels through which that blessing is communicated to others.

Galatians 3:14 makes it clear that the blessing of Abraham for us today is connected with the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the One Who communicates the abundant life of Christ to us and then ministers that same life through us to others.

In James 2:21-23, where Abraham is called God's friend, two incidents from Abraham's life are mentioned:

His believing God when God told him that he would have a son (verse 23 referring to Genesis 15:6).

His offering up Isaac when God asked him to (verse 21 referring to Genesis 22).

These two incidents described in Genesis 15 & 22 are brought together by James when referring to Abraham being called God's friend. These two chapters in Genesis describe two important periods in Abraham's life. Moreover, in these two important chapters, we find the first occurrences in the Bible of two important words - "believe" (Genesis 15:6) and "worship" (Genesis 22:5).

Since all Scripture is inspired by God, there must be some significance attached to the first time an important word occurs in Scripture. These two passages of Scripture therefore will have much to teach us concerning the true meanings of faith and worship.

And these were the two lessons that Abraham had to learn - what it meant to believe God and what it meant to worship Him. Both of these are possible only as we accept the cross as the instrument of our self-emptying.

Trusting God

Abraham had to learn that trusting God meant not merely intellectual belief, but also being emptied of self-sufficiency and self-dependence.

In Genesis 15 (where the word "believe" occurs in verse 6), the paragraph begins with the words, "After these things..." (verse 1). The previous chapter, to which that phrase refers back, indicates that it was a time of great triumph in Abraham's life. With 318 untrained servants, he had gone out and defeated the armies of four kings. And then at the end of all that, he had conducted himself so nobly before the king of Sodom, refusing to take any reward for his efforts. God had helped him marvellously on both these occasions. Now, in the hour of his triumph, it was so easy for Abraham to feel self-sufficient.

At such a time, God spoke to Abraham and told him that he was going to have a son. And not only that, but God also said that through that son would come a seed that would be like the stars of the heaven for

number. It looked almost impossible, but Abraham believed the Lord (Genesis 15:6). The Hebrew word translated "believe" here is "aman" which is the word we use at the end of our prayers: "Amen". It means, "It shall be so". When God told Abraham that he was going to have a son, he replied with an "Amen", meaning in essence, "Lord, I don't know how this is going to take place. But since You have said it, I believe it shall be so."

God's promise looked difficult of fulfilment because Sarah was barren. Of course, Abraham himself was still fertile. So there was some hope. In other words, the promise was not exactly impossible, but certainly difficult.

Helping God Out of a Tight Spot

After Abraham heard God's promise, he must have reasoned with himself and said, "Well, I suppose, I should help God out in this situation, since Sarah is barren". And so, he readily accepted Sarah's suggestion to unite with Hagar his maid. He sincerely desired to help God. He felt that God was in a tight spot, having made a promise that could not, humanly speaking, be fulfilled. God's reputation was at stake. And so, to save God out of this awkward situation, Abraham united with Hagar and produced Ishmael! But God rejected Ishmael as unacceptable, for he was the product of man's self-effort.

So much of the motivation for Christian work in our day, alas, arises out of the same carnal reasoning that Abraham had. Believers are told that God is depending on their efforts and that if they let Him down, His purposes will not be fulfilled! Things apparently have not worked out exactly as God planned and as a result He is in a tight spot now! Some exhortations to Christian service give us the impression that the Almighty is now at His wit's end and is desperately in need of our help!

No doubt, God uses human agency for the outworking of His purposes. He has voluntarily accepted this limitation because He wants us to have the privilege of cooperating with Him in His work. But that certainly does not mean that if we disobey God, His work will remain undone. No. He is sovereign. There is certainly a work for Jesus that we can do; but if we don't do it, He will just pass us by and get someone else to do the job - and we shall miss the privilege of being God's co-workers. Puny men are not going to hinder God from carrying out His program.

God can carry on His work very well without our help. We need to recognize this fact.

If our service for God originates out of any idea that we are helping God out of a tight spot, we shall only produce unacceptable Ishmaels.

That service which has its roots in human energy, fleshly wisdom, human ability and natural talents (even at their very best) is totally unacceptable to God. Ishmael may be very smart and impressive. Abraham may even cry out to God saying, "Oh that Ishmael might live before Thee" (Genesis 17:18). But God's answer is

"No. He was born through your strength, Abraham. So I cannot accept him, however good he may be".

And so with service that originates from ourselves. God did not accept it then and He will not accept it today! If there is any human explanation for our Christian service - if it is merely the result of excellent theological training that our sharp minds have assimilated, or made possible because we have access to enough money to support ourselves in Christian work - then however impressive our work may appear in the eyes of men, it will be burnt up in the day of testing as wood, hay and straw. That day will reveal the

multitude of "Ishmaels" produced by well-meaning Christians, who were never emptied of their self-sufficiency. The only work that will abide for eternity is that which is produced in humble dependence upon the power of God's Holy Spirit. May God help us to learn that lesson now, instead of having regrets at Christ's judgment-seat.

Works of Faith

Our self-life is so subtle and so deceitful that it can enter the very sanctuary of God and try to serve Him there. We have to watch that - and put self to death even when it seeks to serve God.

God's work has to be a work of faith - that is, one that originates in man's helpless dependence upon God. So it is not a question of how effective our work is in the eyes of men or in our own eyes. The important question is whether our work is the result of the Holy Spirit's working, or our own. God is not so much interested in how much is done, as in the question of whose power has energized the work. Was the work done by the power of money and intellectual ability, or by the power of the Holy Spirit? This is the real test of a spiritual work, a work of faith. In other words, God is more interested in quality than in quantity. God's true work carries on today, as of old, not by human power or might, but by the power of the Holy Spirit (Zechariah 4:6). We forget this truth to our own peril.

Man's Extremity - God's Opportunity

Isaac, unlike Ishmael, was not the product of Abraham's strength. Abraham had become sterile by then. (This is clear from Romans 4:19 where not only Sarah's womb but Abraham's body is also said to be "dead"). Isaac was born through God strengthening impotent Abraham. This is the type of service that lasts for eternity. One "Isaac" is worth a thousand "Ishmaels." Abraham could keep Ishmael for some time, but finally God asked him to cast him out (Genesis 21:10-14). All "Ishmaels" will have to be cast out one day. Only Isaac could remain with Abraham. There is a spiritual lesson here. Only that service which is the result of God working through us will remain for eternity. Everything else will be burnt up. You may have heard the saying, "Only one life, it will soon be past; only what's done for Christ will last." It would be more accurate to say, "Only what Christ does through me will last."

Only that which is "from Him and through Him and to Him" (Romans 11:36) will last for eternity. (See my book *Living As Jesus Lived* for a fuller exposition of this.)

Paul lived and laboured according to God's living and working through him (Galatians 2:20 and Colossians 1:29). Hence his life and labours were so effective. He lived by faith and he worked by faith.

In Genesis 16:16, we read that Abraham was 86 years old when Hagar bore Ishmael. In the very next verse (Genesis 17:1), we read that Abraham was 99 years old when God appeared to him again. We see here a gap of 13 years. Those were years when God waited for Abraham to become impotent. God could not fulfil His promise, till Abraham had become impotent. That is God's way with all His servants. He cannot work through them till they recognize their impotence. And in some cases, He has to wait for many years.

Abraham needed to learn what it really meant to trust God. He had to learn that it was only when he became impotent that he could truly exercise faith. In Romans 4:19-21, we read that although Abraham knew that his body was impotent to produce a son, yet that did not worry him. He was strong in faith and glorified God by believing that God was well able to perform what He had promised. He did not waver in

unbelief, for his feet stood firm on the rock of God's Word to him. But when could Abraham exercise such faith? Only when he had come to an end of all confidence in his own ability. We too can exercise real faith only when we reach that state of utter helplessness. This is God's way, so that no flesh may ever glory in His presence.

This does not however mean that we do nothing. No. God does not want us to be reduced to a state of inactivity. That is the other extreme of error. God used Abraham to produce Isaac. God didn't do it all by Himself, for Isaac was not born apart from Abraham doing his part. No. But there was a difference between the birth of Ishmael and the birth of Isaac. In both cases, Abraham was the father. But in the first case, it was in dependence upon his own strength; in the second, in dependence upon the power of God. That was the difference - and what a vital difference!

No Confidence in the Flesh

At the end of the thirteen years of waiting, when God appeared to Abraham, He gave him the covenant of circumcision (Genesis 17:11). Circumcision involved a cutting-off and a casting-off of human flesh. It symbolized a casting off of all confidence in self - as Paul explains in Philippians 3:3: "We are the circumcisionwho have no confidence in the flesh."

Notice, that in the very same year that Abraham obeyed God and circumcised himself, Isaac was conceived (cf. Genesis 17:1 and 21:5). There is a lesson for us to learn here. God waits until we learn to put no confidence in ourselves and our abilities. And when we finally come to the place where we realize that it is impossible for us in ourselves to serve God and to please Him (Romans 8:8), and when we trust God to work through us, then He takes us up and does an eternal work through us. At the age of 85, the birth of a child to Abraham looked difficult. By the time he was 99 and impotent, that which had been difficult had now become impossible. Then God acted.

Someone has said that in a true work of God, there are three stages - Difficult, Impossible and Done! Human wisdom finds it difficult to follow such reasoning, for spiritual truth is foolishness to the natural mind. But this is God's way.

No flesh will ever be able to glory in God's presence, either now or in eternity (See 1 Corinthians 1:29). God is working to the point where finally Christ will have the pre-eminence in all things (Colossians 1:18). If there is going to be some work in Heaven, which lasts for eternity, which has been done by human ingenuity and cleverness, then all through eternity some man will be able to take the credit for it. But God is going to make sure that it will not be so. All that ministers to human glory will be burnt up at the judgment seat of Christ. Here on earth, men may receive the credit for something they do, but that will all be reduced to ashes before we reach the shores of eternity. One of these days, God will gather up all things in Christ and then throughout eternal ages Christ alone will have the pre-eminence.

Jessie Penn-Lewis was a woman whose writings have helped many people understand the way of the cross. About ten years after her conversion, when seeking to be filled with the Holy Spirit, she tells of how she got a terrible revelation. She saw a hand holding up a bundle of filthy rags and a gentle voice saying, "This is the outcome of all your past service for God". She protested that she had been consecrated to the Lord for years. But the Lord told her that all her service had been merely consecrated SELF - the outcome of her own energy and her own plans. And then she heard one word spoken to her, "Crucified". She had not asked to be crucified, she thought, but to be filled. But she rested on that one word and came to know Jesus as the Risen Lord!!

Self must be crucified, before there can be any service that pleases God. We may serve God with all our hearts and then say, "Lord, please accept these Ishmaels that I have produced." But God will say "No"! He will say "No" now and He will say "No" in eternity.

Dependence on the Holy Spirit

Let us test ourselves in one area - the area of prayer. Do we really know what it is to pray what the Bible calls "the prayer of faith"? It is only when we come to an end of ourselves that we can pray like that - for true prayer, as O. Hallesby has said, is simply confessing our helplessness to God. There is no credit in uttering beautiful, eloquent and impressive prayers. Such ordinary praying can be done by anyone - even by a heathen. But the prayer of faith can come only from one who has recognized his impotence and utter helplessness without God. This is what it means to "pray in the Spirit" (Ephesians 6:18); and that is the only type of prayer that brings an answer. As someone has said, what we need in our day is not more prayer but more answered prayer. Let us not fool ourselves, like the heathen, that God is pleased by our much praying. No. Prayer has no value before God, if it does not arise out of a recognition of our own impotence.

So little of evangelical Christian work today is a work of faith. We have so many electronic gadgets and other aids to help us in our service for the Lord that many of us are, all unconsciously, depending on them, rather than on the Lord. It appears as though one does not need to be filled with the Holy Spirit, these days, to serve the Lord. All one needs is a tape-recorder, a few Christian movies, audio-visual aids, and some rich businessmen to provide financial support. If added to these, one also has a dynamic personality and eloquence or a trained singing voice, he can go out and "win souls for Christ"!

How far evangelical Christianity has drifted from the faith of the apostles! What a tragedy that the techniques of the business world have been brought into the sanctuary of God. Let us never be fooled by the apparent success of these methods. We can accumulate statistics of our "conversions", but we shall realize in eternity that they were spurious. Heaven does not rejoice over our labours, because we have not delivered souls from their self-centredness, but merely entertained them and given them a good time.

God's way has not changed. Even today, we need to be emptied of our self-sufficiency and filled with the Spirit of God, if we are to produce "Isaacs" that please God. The Bible says,

Cursed be the man who depends on man and who makes his self-sufficiency the arm on which he leansfor he shall be like a barren tree (Jeremiah 17:5 - paraphrase).

However much such a man may give the appearance of fruitfulness to others, he will stand in eternity like a barren tree, for his work originated in himself and in dependence on human energies and human resources. On the other hand, it says, "Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord and has made the Lord his confidence. He is like a tree planted along a riverbank, with its roots reaching deep into the waterits leaves stay green and it goes right on producing all its luscious fruit." (Jeremiah 17:7, 8 - LB)

To change the illustration (to the one found in 1 Corinthians 3:10-15), what are we building with - wood, hay and straw, or gold, silver and precious stones? One ounce of gold is worth more than a ton of straw after the fire has done its work. Only genuine works of faith will abide in that day of testing.

An End of Ourselves

In Edith Schaeffer's book 'L'Abri', she recounts how God brought her husband Francis Schaeffer and his co-workers, again and again to a point of utter helplessness. More than once they found no way out of their impasse. The enemies of the gospel almost triumphed at many a point. In their impotence they looked to God to work on their behalf. And He did - not just once or twice, but repeatedly. This is the type of work - a work of faith - that will remain for eternity.

It is not the size of a work that impresses God. The world looks for size and numbers. But God is looking for works of faith - even if they be the size of mustard seeds.

And so, when God brings us to an end of ourselves, hedging us in on every side and shattering our hopes, let us take heart! He is preparing us for greater usefulness by bringing us first to the place of impotence. He's equipping us to produce Isaacs.

This was how Jesus prepared His apostles for His service. What do you think was the purpose of His training them for 3½ years? They were not being coached to write scholarly theses that would earn them doctorates in theology! That's how some people today feel they can be equipped to serve the Lord. But Jesus didn't train His apostles for that. None of the twelve disciples (except perhaps Judas Iscariot!) would have qualified for a basic theological degree (by our standards), even if they had tried. Jesus trained them to learn one lesson primarily - that, without Him they could do nothing (John 15:5). And, I tell you, a man who has learned that lesson is worth more than a hundred theological professors who haven't learnt that lesson.

Total dependence upon God is the mark of the true servant of God. It was true even of the Lord Jesus Christ, when He was on earth, as the Servant of Jehovah. In a prophetic reference to Him in Isaiah 42:1, God says, "Behold My Servant, whom I uphold." He does not stand in His own strength; He is upheld by God. Because Christ emptied Himself thus, God put His Spirit upon Him, as the verse goes on to say. It is only on those who have come to an end of themselves and emptied themselves of self-confidence and self-sufficiency, that God pours out His Spirit.

Look at some of the remarkable statements that Jesus made, which clearly show how emptied of self He was:

The Son can do nothing of HimselfI can of Mine own self do nothingI do nothing of MyselfI have not spoken of Myself; but the Father Who sent Me, He gave Me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak.... The words that I speak unto you, I speak not of Myself (John 5:19, 30; 8:28; 12:49; 14:10).

Amazing! The perfect, sinless Son of God lived by faith. Emptied of all dependence upon His own self, He depended entirely on His Father. It is thus that God calls us to live too.

When we are self-sufficient, we try to use God to help us serve Him. But when we are emptied, God can use us.

A.B. Simpson, that great man of God who founded the Christian and Missionary Alliance tells how he learnt this lesson in his own life. As a young pastor, he had struggled to serve God with his own energies until his health broke down. Finally he met with God in a way that changed his whole outlook on Christian service. He realized that he had been using God. Henceforth he would let God use him. He expressed his experience in the words of his well-known hymn:

"Once it was my working, His it hence shall be;

Once I tried to use Him, now He uses me.

Once the power I wanted, now the Mighty One;

Once for self I laboured, now for Him alone."

This is what it means to trust God. And this was the first lesson that Abraham had to learn.

Worshipping God

The second lesson that Abraham had to learn was the true meaning of worship. If trusting God means to be emptied of self-confidence and self-sufficiency, worshipping God means to be emptied of everything (including one's possessions).

As in Genesis 15, in Genesis 22 also, the paragraph begins with the phrase, "After these things...." Here too, as we look at the circumstances that immediately precede this hour of testing, we find Abraham in a triumphant position. The heathen had come to him and said, "Abraham, we've been watching your life and we know that God is with you in all that you do" (Genesis 21:22). No doubt they had heard of the miraculous way in which Sarah conceived, and were convinced that God was with this family. Ishmael had been sent away. Isaac was now the darling of Abraham's heart. Abraham stood in grave danger, at this time, of losing his first love and devotion for God. And so God tested him again, and told him to offer up Isaac as a sacrifice.

Sacrifice and Worship

Have we ever heard God calling us to hard and difficult tasks like that? Or do we only hear Him comforting us with promises all the time? Oswald Chambers has said that if we have never heard God speaking a hard word to us, it is doubtful whether we have ever really heard God at all.

It is easy for our carnal minds to imagine that God is speaking to us with comforting promises all the time. Because we do not like the hard way, we can be deaf to God's voice when He calls us to a difficult task.

But Abraham had ears to hear, and a heart that was willing to obey anything that God commanded. He rose up early the next morning and went forth to obey God (verse 3). The record does not tell us what the old patriarch went through, during the previous night, after God had spoken to him. I am sure he did not sleep that night. He must have kept awake and gone and looked at his beloved son again and again; and the tears must have rolled down his eyes as he thought of what he had to do to him. How difficult it must have been for Abraham to offer up the son of his old age. But he was willing to obey God at any cost. Fifty years or so, earlier, he had put his hand to the plough when God called him in Ur; and he would not now look back. In the words of another, what Abraham was saying was:

"Keep me from looking back -

The handles of my plough with tears are wet,

The shears with rust are spoiled, and yet, and yet,

My God! My God! Keep me from turning back"

There were no complaints and no questions. Abraham did not say, "Lord, I've been so faithful already. Why do you ask this hard thing also?" Neither did he say, "Lord, I've already sacrificed so much - much more than all those around me. Why do you call me to sacrifice more?" Many believers often compare the sacrifices they have made with those that others have made. And they hesitate when God calls them to go further than others around them. But not so Abraham. There was no limit to his obedience and no end to his willingness to sacrifice for his God. No wonder he became the friend of God.

There was faith in Abraham's heart as he went up to sacrifice Isaac, that God would somehow raise his son from the dead. Hebrews 11:19 tells us that. God had already given Abraham a foretaste of resurrection-power in his own body and in Sarah's, through the birth of Isaac. Surely it would be no problem for such a God to bring back to life an Isaac who was slain on the altar. And so Abraham tells his servants when leaving them at the foot of Mount Moriah, "I and the lad will go yonder and worship and [we will both] come [back] again to you" (verse 5). That was a word of faith. He believed that Isaac would come back with him.

Notice too that he tells his servants, "We are going to worship God." He is not complaining that God is requiring too much from him, neither is he boasting about the marvellous sacrifice that he is about to make for God. No. Abraham did not belong to the category of those who subtly inform others about the sacrifices they make for God. Abraham said he was going to worship his God. And there we understand something of the real meaning of worship.

Remember how Jesus once said, "Abraham rejoiced to see My day; and he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56). Surely it must have been here on Mount Moriah that Abraham saw the day of Christ. In prophetic vision, the aged patriarch saw in his own action, a picture (faint though it be) of that day when God the Father Himself would lead His only begotten Son up Calvary's hill and offer Him up as a sacrifice for the sins of mankind. And that day on Mount Moriah, Abraham knew something of what it would cost the heart of God to save a wayward world. He came to a place of intimate fellowship with the heart of God that morning. Yes, he worshipped God - not just with beautiful words and hymns, but through costly obedience and sacrifice.

A deep and intimate knowledge of God can come only through such obedience. We may accumulate plenty of accurate theological information in our minds; but real spiritual knowledge can come only when we give up everything to God. There is no other way.

The Giver or His gift?

Abraham was being tested here as to whether he would love the Giver or His gifts more. Isaac was undoubtedly the gift of God, but Abraham was in danger of having an inordinate affection for his son. Isaac was becoming an idol who would cloud Abraham's spiritual vision. And so God intervened to save Abraham from such a tragedy.

In his book 'The Pursuit of God', A.W. Tozer speaks of "the blessedness of possessing nothing". God was teaching Abraham on Mount Moriah the blessedness of being emptied of everything and possessing nothing. Before that day, Abraham had held Isaac with a possessive spirit. But after he laid his son on that altar and gave him up to God, he never possessed Isaac again. Yes, it is true that, God gave Isaac back to Abraham, and Abraham had him at home. But he never possessed Isaac as his own again. Isaac, thenceforth, was God's. And Abraham held Isaac as a steward holds the property of his master. In other words, he had Isaac, but he never again possessed him.

This is to be our attitude to the things of this world. We can have them and use them. But we are never to cling to any one of them. Everything we own should have been placed on the altar and given completely to God. We must possess nothing. We can then keep only that which God gives back to us from the altar - and we are to keep even such things only as stewards. Only then can we truly worship God. This is the pathway to the glory of the Christ-life.

This principle does not apply to material things alone. It applies to spiritual gifts as well. It is possible for us to hold even the gifts of the Holy Spirit in a possessive way. Was not Isaac the gift of God? Why couldn't Abraham hold on to him then? To have to send away Ishmael was understandable, because he was not the promised seed. But Isaac's case was different. He was God's gift, produced in God's strength. Why should Abraham have to give him up as well?

And so we may argue too. We can understand the need to give up our attachment to the things of the world. But surely, we feel, we can hold on to the gifts that God Himself has given us. But God says,

"No. Lay even your spiritual gifts (which I have given you) on the altar and give them back to me, lest they fill your life and cloud your vision of Me, the Giver."

God would have us delivered from any inordinate attachment to even the most sacred gifts of the Spirit that He has given us. He wants us to sacrifice even the "Isaacs" that we have received from Him and not cling to any one of them. Isn't it this that many believers have not seen? They have given up their Ishmaels but not their Isaacs. They have given up sinful things. But the gifts that God gave them they are now using to glorify themselves - like the prodigal son, who took his father's gifts and spent them on himself.

What is it that fills our vision - our gifts and our ministry, or the Giver Himself? This is what we need to ask ourselves constantly. We are most in danger when God has blessed us much and used us greatly. It is so easy at such times to lose the vision of God. We need to go back to the altar on Mount Moriah again and again and give our all to God repeatedly.

True worship begins when the Giver Himself fills our hearts and our vision. Only then can we safely use His gifts. Otherwise we shall abuse God's gifts and prostitute them to selfish uses. Isn't this the reason why there is so much misuse of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in our day?

That Which Costs Us Everything

Abraham's devotion was tested that day when God asked him for Isaac. Had God asked Abraham for 10,000 sheep or 5,000 rams, that would have been easier for Abraham to offer. But one Isaac cost him everything, and he decided to offer nothing less than what God asked for. Abraham could have said the words that David said, years later,

"I will never offer to my God that which costs me nothing" (2 Samuel 24:24).

Yes, true worship involves our offering to God that which costs us everything.

Interestingly, it was on this very spot (where Abraham offered Isaac, on Mount Moriah), that David spoke the words quoted above (the threshing floor of Araunah was located here). It was here too that the Lord chose to build His temple, a thousand years later (2 Chronicles 3:1). God ordained His house to be built on the very spot where two of His servants (Abraham and David) had made costly sacrifices. That was

where the fire fell from heaven and that was where the glory of God was seen (2 Chronicles 7:1). It is even so today. God builds His true church and manifests His power and glory where He finds men and women who are willing to deny themselves and offer Him that which costs them everything.

Does our Christianity cost us something? Is our service for God an easygoing, cheap thing that does not cost us time, money or energy? Do our prayers cost us something? Have we drawn a limit to the sacrifices we are willing to make for God? Do we look for ease and comfort? If not, how can we expect the fire of God to fall upon us and the glory of God to be seen in our lives? Let us not deceive ourselves. The fullness of the Holy Spirit can result only from a wholehearted giving up of ourselves to God.

The way of the cross is painful. How painful it must have been for Abraham to face the thought of slaying his own son himself. It is not easy for us to see our children suffering as a result of the stand we have taken for God. That can be very costly. But blessed are we, if we are willing to suffer even that. God is no man's debtor. If we have honoured Him, He will certainly honour us; and we shall find our children following God too, as Isaac followed in Abraham's footsteps. Isaac's willingness to be tied to the altar and to be slain was an indication of his own devotion to his father's God. Isaac was a strong, able-bodied, young man, and his aged father could never have tied him to the altar, if Isaac himself had not been willing. But Isaac had seen the reality of God in his father's life, and so he was willing to submit to anything that God desired. We see Isaac's devotion to God here just as much as we see Abraham's. And we see how true it was what the Lord had said that Abraham would

"command his children and his household to keep the way of the Lord" (Genesis 18:19).

On the other hand, many believers have lowered their high standards and compromised their Christian principles, for the sake of some material advantage for their children - only to see their children growing up to break their hearts and live for the world. Oh the tragedy of it!

Heaven's greatest rewards are reserved for those who have followed in Abraham's footsteps, and who like him have not withheld anything from God, whatever the cost.

I remember hearing the story of a young American couple who went to China as missionaries, before the Communists took over that land. They asked their mission board to assign them to some unreached area that had not yet been evangelized. Accordingly, they were posted to a little village in the interior, near Tibet. They laboured faithfully there for several years, but did not see a single soul saved. God then gave them the gift of a baby daughter. And as that daughter grew up, they saw a miracle taking place before their eyes. They taught their little girl Bible-verses and choruses in the local language, and she in turn taught them to the children with whom she played. Those children went home and taught these verses to their parents. Soon one person was converted to Christ.

This missionary couple continued to labour there for another 14 years (making a total of 21 years) without a furlough, and in that period seven more souls were saved. (God doesn't measure success by statistics as men do. This couple had spent 21 years to show 8 souls the way to eternal life. Surely their reward will be great when Christ returns). At the end of those 21 years, one day the father noticed a patch on the hand of his 14-year-old daughter. They took her to a doctor who told them that the girl had contracted leprosy. It broke their hearts to think of what their child had to suffer because of their devotion to God and to His call. The mother and daughter travelled back to America for the daughter's treatment. But the man himself stayed on in China. When asked why he did not go back to America with his family, he replied, "I would have liked to have gone home with my family. But back there in my mission station, there are eight

souls who need to be instructed and fed. If someone else replaces me, it will take years before they develop confidence in him. And so I feel I should go back to them." It cost that family everything they had, to serve God.

So many believers who have so much, give so little to God. But a few who have so little, give so much. And it is through this small and faithful remnant that God builds His church. The kingdom of God does not come through spectacular outward show, but through men of God such as that missionary. Some of these men may not be well-known on earth. But they will shine as stars in eternity.

The apostle Paul came from a wealthy business family in Tarsus and could have chosen an easy life, when he was saved on the Damascus Road. He could have settled down to a comfortable life as a Christian businessman in Tarsus. But he didn't do that. He went out to serve God and endured hardship. He got 195 stripes on his back, he was stoned and suffered shipwreck, and he faced many dangers in his service for God. If we were to ask him why he endured all that, he would say,

"When I gave my life to the Lord, I determined that I would never offer Him any service that cost me nothing."

Two hundred years ago, the Moravian brethren formed one of the greatest missionary movements that the world has ever seen. Two of their number, heard of a slave colony in the West Indies and went there, willing to be sold as slaves for the rest of their lives, in order to preach the gospel to the slaves on that island. Two others heard of a leper-colony in Africa where no one was allowed to enter and return, for fear that the disease might spread. They volunteered to go into that leper colony for the rest of their lives, in order to present Christ to the inmates of the colony. The motto of those Moravian brethren was "to win for the Lamb that was slain the reward of His sufferings". They certainly knew what it was to worship God, by offering Him that which cost them everything.

How shallow and superficial our lives and labours are, compared with those of men like these. How much has it cost us to serve God - in terms of loss of money, comfort, reputation, honour and health? Do we realize that we do not really know what it is to worship God if our Christianity has not cost us everything that this world counts dear. Those who serve God wholeheartedly, giving up everything for Him, are the only ones who will have no regret in eternity. The Lord is calling today for those who will follow Him along the pathway of the cross - being emptied of everything.

Margaret Clarkson places this challenge so clearly before us in her hymn:

"So send I you - to labour unrewarded,

To serve unpaid, unloved, unsought, unknown

To bear rebuke, to suffer scorn and scoffing,

So send I you - to toil for Me alone.

So send I you - to loneliness and longing,

With heart a-hungering for the loved and known;

Forsaking home and kindred, friend and dear one,

So send I you - to know My love alone."

This is the way of power. And we need to be reminded of it again in a day when many think that there are short-cuts and once-for-all experiences that guarantee spiritual power. The way of the cross alone is the way of power. Jesus steadfastly set His face to go to the cross. What about us? We shall face this choice daily. If we are looking for three easy steps to the victorious life, then the Bible has no message for us. But if we are willing to pay the price of denying ourselves and taking up our cross daily and following Jesus, then we shall indeed know the power of the Spirit of God resting upon us for our life and service.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/zac-poonen/beauty-for-ashes-3-the-pathway-to-the-christ-life-ii-being-emptied/>

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