

PENTECOST 5

Proper 8 - Year A

*This Bible study was written by **Brian B. Pinter** in 2011.*

Genesis 22:1-14

22 After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."² He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you."³ So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him.⁴ On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away.⁵ Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you."⁶ Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. And the two of them walked on together.⁷ Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"⁸ Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." And the two of them walked on together.

⁹ When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar on top of the wood.¹⁰ Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.¹¹ But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."¹² He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."¹³ And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.¹⁴ So Abraham called that place "The Lord will provide," as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided."

Commentary from Brian B. Pinter

Many contemporary Christians find this text to be very challenging, for it raises uncomfortable questions about the nature of God and how God interacts with us. Why would God test Abraham by ordering him to sacrifice his son Isaac? One explanation is that the authors of Genesis were attempting to clearly and definitively forbid human sacrifice, a practice that still survived in the earliest era of Israel's history.

Other see this text as a statement that God does indeed test us to measure our faith. We have often heard our fellow Christians explain hardship in life by saying, "God is testing me." But would a loving, merciful God actually do this? After all, we don't expect adults in our lives who love and care for us to test us. If they did such a thing we would refer to it as "playing mind games" or something less charitable. No, adults don't test each other and many people of mature faith wonder if God would do such a thing either.

Perhaps this passage and the idea of testing makes more sense if we admit that life can sometimes test us with adversity and God watches us to see how we will respond.

Discussion Questions

Do you feel that God tests us in the spirit that God tested Abraham? Why or why not?

What have been instances in your own experience of faith and life that have tested your character? Did you have a sense that God, and others, might be watching your response?

Psalm 13

- 1 How long, O Lord?
will you forget me for ever? *
how long will you hide your face from me?
- 2 How long shall I have perplexity in my mind,
and grief in my heart, day after day? *
how long shall my enemy triumph over me?
- 3 Look upon me and answer me, O Lord my God; *
give light to my eyes, lest I sleep in death;
- 4 Lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed over him," *
and my foes rejoice that I have fallen.
- 5 But I put my trust in your mercy; *
my heart is joyful because of your saving help.
- 6 I will sing to the Lord, for he has dealt with me
richly; *
I will praise the Name of the Lord Most High.

Commentary from Brian B. Pinter

This psalm takes the form of an individual's lament. The psalmist words of sorrow and hopelessness express the biblical notion of poverty, i.e. the reality that one has nowhere else to turn but God. The enemy of verse 4 might be an adversary or perhaps death itself. The psalmists often expressed their anxiety and dread with allusions to death and descent to the underworld. It seems almost as if the speaker in this psalm is trying to shame God into acting, as if to say, "You, God of justice, how long will you allow this injustice to prevail?" Nonetheless the psalmist is confident that God will transform a situation that appears to be hopeless through an act of mercy and salvation.

Discussion Questions

What have been times in our experience of life and faith where God's absence and silence is particularly felt? How do the psalmist's attempts to elicit God's action resonate with our own experiences of prayer when we are experiencing despair?

How does the psalmist's hope for salvation presage the New Testament's message of resurrection? What are the common threads of this overarching narrative of God's power to transform death into life?

Romans 6:12-23

¹²Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal bodies, so that you obey their desires. ¹³No longer present your members to sin as instruments of unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. ¹⁴For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. ¹⁵What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! ¹⁶Do you not know that, if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? ¹⁷But thanks be to God that you who were slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted ¹⁸and that you, having been set free from sin, have become enslaved to righteousness. ¹⁹I am speaking in human terms because of your limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and lawlessness, leading to even more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, leading to sanctification.

²⁰When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. ²¹So what fruit did you then gain from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death. ²²But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the fruit you have leads to sanctification, and the end is eternal life. ²³For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Commentary from Brian B. Pinter

Paul has just concluded a lengthy discourse concerning what Jesus has accomplished through his death and resurrection, and how we share in the effects of those events through our baptism. Above all, Paul is saying that we are no longer enslaved by the power of Sin (to distinguish this power from an individual action, we shall use the capital S). Paul understood Sin to be more than simply a wrong action. Rather, Sin was a cosmic power that ensnared everyone. But Jesus, through his death and resurrection, has freed us from the false value system of Sin. Paul attempts to explain this reality in today's epistle through the analogy of slavery.

The question is, "Whom do we serve, Sin or God?" For Paul, the answer is clear, but he recognizes that sinful forces still have great influence over us, even though we

are committed to living as Christians. God suffuses our lives with grace that makes living by the values and example of Jesus possible. The great challenge remains to admit those areas of our lives that still serve Sin, and accept God's gift of grace.

Discussion Questions

How/where/when have you experienced the enslaving power of Sin of which Paul speaks?

How/where/when have you experienced God's free gift of grace which empowers us to live lives free of Sin's false values?

Matthew 10:40-42

⁴⁰ “Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. ⁴¹ Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous, ⁴² and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

Commentary from Brian B. Pinter

Do we recognize those people that Jesus sends into our lives to minister to us? Jewish law had a well-developed legal tradition regarding emissaries. One text said, “A man’s agent is like himself.” Jesus’ teaching here invests Christian ministers with a great deal of dignity and a sense that one’s ministerial commissioning originates with God. But this is of little use unless the minister is received with an open heart. Those whom Jesus sends will not always be recognizable though. Some will be prophets (people the world might think to be a bit eccentric or strange). Others will be righteous people (perhaps those who suffer for the faith and otherwise bear witness to their discipleship – people the world might view as foolishly and naively standing by their convictions.) Notice how Jesus refers to some of those who will be sent as “little ones” (v. 42.) Scholars suggest that in Matthew’s community these “little ones” might have represented the lowliest and simplest members. These are people that we might easily dismiss because we hastily assume they have nothing to teach or offer us. Jesus invites us to be open to his unexpected ways of working in our lives.

Discussion Questions

Who have been among the “little ones” who have ministered to us in unexpected ways?

Is Jesus calling you to be one of his emissaries? What are the signs of this call? To whom shall you minister?