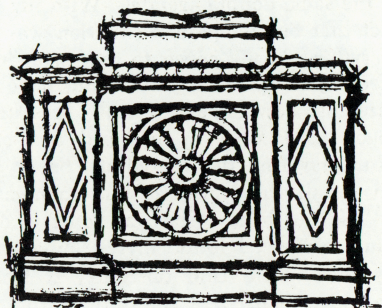


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Life Is Gift

A Sermon by

John R. Claypool

• LOUISVILLE / KENTUCKY •

Scripture Reference — Genesis 22:1-14

For the last eighteen months now, this particular episode out of the life of Abraham has held a great fascination for me. As you might suspect, I can identify in large measure with much that took place there. For example, I know something of the overwhelming shock that Abraham must have experienced when he realized one night that God was demanding his son of him. I found myself engulfed in the same torrent of emotions a year ago last June when I first heard the word "leukemia" spoken about my child, and there is no way to describe the mixture of horror and bitterness and terror and fear that churns up within you at the advent of such a realization. I can also identify with the way Abraham proceeded to respond to this eventuality. As I see him slowly setting out on this journey he had no desire to take, I can almost sense the double agenda that was going on within him. Intellectually, he realizes that the worst could very well happen, and so he does not try to run away but sets his face steadfastly for Moriah. Yet emotionally there is a hope within him that something will intervene even at the last moment, and the

process will be reversed. Abraham gives expression to this residual hope there at the foot of the mountain when little Isaac asked about the lamb for the sacrifice, and I know exactly how he felt, for I, too, have lived these last eighteen months with the same double agenda. With my mind I faced up to the fact that our daughter's situation was very serious, and I did everything in my power to cope with it realistically. But at the feeling level, I had abounding hope. In fact, I did not realize just how hopeful I really was until that Saturday afternoon as I knelt by her bed and saw her stop breathing. You may find this incredible, but I was the most shocked man in all the world at that moment. You see, deep down, I did not believe she was going to die. In spite of all my mind told me, I found myself clinging to the hope that any day they would find the cure, or God would see fit to heal her miraculously. I certainly did not demand this of God or feel that He owed it to us; I simply believed that what had happened for Abraham would happen for us, and that even if it came at the last moment, the knife would be stayed.

But, of course, that is not what happened four weeks ago last Saturday, and I am still in the process of trying to take in what did in fact occur. It is at this point that Abraham's experience and my own break off in different directions. He got to go down the mountain with his child by his side, and oh how his heart must have sung with joy to have come through so much so well. But my situation is different. Here I am, left alone on that mountain, with my child and not a ram there on the altar, and the question is: how on earth do I get down and move back to the normalcy of life? I cannot learn from Abraham, lucky man that he is. I am left to grope through the darkness by myself, and to ask: "Where do I go from here? Is there a road out, and if so, which one?"

Let me hasten to admit that I am really in no position to speak with any finality to such a question this morning, for I am still much in shock, much at sea, very much broken and by no means fully healed. What I have to share is of a highly provisional character, as of now when the light is admittedly very dim. However, if you will accept it as such, I do feel I have made a few discoveries in these last four weeks that may be of worth to some of you. To be very specific, I have looked down three alternative roads that seem to lead out of this darkness, and two of them appear to me to be deadends, while a third holds some real promise.

The first of these routes comes highly recommended, and I would label it "the road of unquestioning resignation." If I have been told once, I have been told a hundred times: "We must not question God. We must not try to understand. We have no right to ask or to inquire into the ways of God with men. The way out is to submit. We must silently



and totally surrender. We must accept what God does without a word or a murmur."

Now I will admit that there is both ancient and practical wisdom in this approach to deep sorrow, and in one sense it is utterly realistic, for if I have learned anything in all of this, it is just how weak and ineffectual we humans are against the immensities of life and death. Since I was powerless a month ago to do anything to avert this agony, why bother now to try to say anything?

Therefore, I repeat, there is a wisdom of sorts down this road of unquestioning resignation. The only trouble is, it is not a Christian wisdom, and in fact a denial of the heart of our faith. I have been frankly dismayed at how many deeply devoted Christians have recommended this way to me, and I have wondered to myself: "Do not they realize what such an approach implies about the whole of existence?"

To put it bluntly, this sort of silent submission undermines the most precious dimension of our existence, namely, the personal dimension. It reduces all of life to a mechanical power transaction. To be sure, a leaf submits to the wind without saying a word, and a rock allows the flood water to do whatever it pleases without murmur, but are these appropriate analogies for the relations of God and man? According to the Bible they are not, for in this document the mystery of Godness is depicted as involving more than brute power. The One who moves through these pages is by nature a Being of love, a Father who pitieth His children rather than a Force who knocks about a lot of helpless objects. And of course, words and questions and dialogue back and forth are at the heart of the way persons — especially fathers and children — ought to relate.

Where, then, did we Christians ever get the notion that we must not question God or have no right to pour out our souls to Him and ask why? Did not Job in the Old Testament cry out to God in the midst of his agony and attempt to interrogate the Almighty? Did not Jesus Himself agonize with God in Gethsemane, telling Him how He felt and what He wanted, and then cry out from the Cross: "My God, My God! Why? Why have you forsaken me?" Would the verse "Ask and it shall be given you, seek and you shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you" ever have appeared in Holy Scripture if unquestioning acquiescence had been the way to meet tragedy?

I, for one, see nothing but a dead end down this road of silent resignation, for it is one of those medicines that cures at the expense of killing the organism it is supposed to heal. After all, my questions in the face of this event are a real part of me just now, and to deny them or to suppress them in the name of mechanically bowing to a superior Force is an affront both to God and to my own nature and to the kind

of relation we are supposed to have. There is more honest faith in an act of questioning than in the act of silent submission, for implicit in the very asking is the faith that some light can be given. This is why I found such help in a letter I received from Dr. Carlyle Marney just before Laura Lue passed away. He admitted that he had no word for the suffering of the innocent, and never had had, but he said: "I fall back on the idea that God has a lot to give an account for." Now to be honest, no one had ever said anything like that to me before, and at first, it was a little shocking, but the more I thought about it, the truer it became to the faith of the Bible. At no point in its teaching is there ever an indication that God wants us to stay like rocks or even little infants in our relation to Him. He wants us to become mature sons and daughters, which means that *He holds us responsible for our actions and expects us to hold Him responsible for His!* I do not believe God wants me to hold in these questions that burn my heart and soul, questions like: "Why is there leukemia? Why are children of promise cut down at the age of ten? Why did you let Laura Lue suffer so excruciatingly and then let her die?" I am really honoring God when I come clean and say: "You owe me an explanation," for you see, I believe He will be able to give such an accounting when all the facts are in, and until then, it is valid to ask.

It is not rebelliousness, then, but faith that keeps me from finding any promise down the road of unquestioning resignation. This approach is closer to pagan stoicism than to Christian humility. I have no choice but to submit to this event of death. However, the question remains and I believe I honor God by continuing to ask and seek and knock, rather than resigning myself to be a rock.

Having said that, however, I need to hasten on to identify the second dead-end route lest I badly confuse you. It is what I would call "the road of total intellectual understanding," the way of explaining everything completely or tying all the loose ends up in a tidy answer. Now to be sure, I have just said that I believe some day God will be able to give account for what He has done and show how it all fits together, but that eschaton is not now. This means that any attempt at this moment to absolutize or to find an answer that will account for all the evidence will end in failure and be a real distortion of reality.

I perhaps need to confess to you that at times in the last few months I have been tempted to absolutize about life and to conclude that this whole existence of ours is utterly absurd. More than once I looked radical doubt full in the face and honestly wondered if all our talk about love and purpose and a Fatherly God was not simply a veil of fantasy that we pathetic humans had projected against the Void. For you see, in light of the evidence closest at hand, to have absolu-



tized at all would have been to conclude that all was absurd and that there was no Ultimate Purpose. Like the times, for example, when Laura Lue was hurting so intensely that she had to bite on a rag and used to beg me to pray to God to take away that awful pain. I would kneel down beside her bed and pray with all the faith and conviction of my soul, and nothing would happen, except the pain continued to rage on. Or again, the time she asked me in the dark of the night: "When will this leukemia go away?" I answered: "I don't know, darling, but we are doing everything we know to make that happen." Then she said: "Have you asked God when it will go away?" And I said: "Yes, you have heard me pray to Him many times." And then she said with directness: "What did He say? When did He say it would go away?" And I had to admit to myself He had not said a word. I had done a lot of talking and praying and pleading, but the response of the heavens had been silence.

As I have said, in moments like that I was tempted to absolutize about life and try to arrange all existence around one explaining principle, but clearer moments made me realize that such simplicity would not be true to reality. For you see, alongside the utter absurdity of what was happening to this little girl were countless other experiences that were full of love and purpose and meaning. From people in the clinic and at the hospital, from unnumbered hosts of you in the church and the community, came evidences of goodness that were anything but absurd. And I realized if I were going to be true to it all, this data had to be balanced in with equal weight alongside all the darkness.

I was reminded of a conclusion I came to a long time ago: that you do not solve all the intellectual problems by concluding all is absurd. To be sure, it is hard to account for evil or the assumption that God is all good and all powerful, but if you do away with that assumption and go to the other extreme, you are then left with the problem of how to account for all the goodness and purpose that most assuredly also exists. This leads me to conclude that expecting to find any one total explanation or answer to this situation is futile. Never has the stark paradox of real darkness alongside of real light been more apparent to me than in the last days, which means I shall continue to ask questions, but not expect, in history at least, to find any complete answer. George Buttrick is right in saying that life is essentially a series of events to be borne and lived through rather than intellectual riddles to be played with and solved. Courage is worth ten times more than any answer that claims to be total. To absolutize in such a way that either the darkness swallows up the light or the light the darkness is untrue to our human condition that "knows in part" and does all its seeing "as through a glass darkly."

For me, at least, then, the roads called unquestioning

resignation and total understanding hold no promise of leading out of the darkness of the mount where I lost my child. But remember, I said in the beginning there was a third way, and what little I have learned of it I now want to share.

I call this one "the road of gratitude," and interestingly enough, it is basic to this story of Abraham and Isaac that serves as our text. Years ago, when I first started taking the Bible seriously, this whole episode used to bother me a good deal, for what kind of jealous God is it, I wondered, who demands even a man's child as a sign of devotion? However, as I moved more deeply into the Biblical revelation, I came to realize that that was not the point at issue at all in this event. What God was trying to teach Abraham here and throughout his whole existence was this one basic fact; namely, that *life is gift*, pure, simple, sheer gift, and we are to relate to it in this light. The promise that came originally to Abraham from God was literally "out of the blue." Just as he had not been in on the creation of the world or his own birth, so Abraham had done nothing to earn the right of having a land of his own or descendants more numerous than the stars. Such a promise came as a pure gift, and in the face of it Abraham was called on to receive it, to participate in it fully and joyfully, to handle it with the open hands of gratitude. And this, of course, was a symbol of how man was meant to relate to existence itself. Life, too, is a gift, and it, too, is to be received and participated in and handled with gratitude. But right here is the problem. The reason God was having to start all over again with Abraham was that mankind had lost this sense of life as a gift and the relation to it as being one of gratitude. Instead, men had tried to earn life by the ardors of legalism, or to possess it totally as if it belonged to them alone. And all of these false relations served only to curdle life and make of it a crushing burden or the occasion of anxiety. The whole point in the Abraham saga lies in God's effort to restore men to the right vision of life and the right relationship to it. Only when it is seen as a gift and handled with the open hands of gratitude is life the joy God meant for it to be. And these were the truths God was seeking to establish as He waited so long to send Isaac and then asked for him back. Did Abraham realize that it was all a gift, and not something to be earned or to be owned, but received, participated in, held freely in gratefulness?

This is the perspective that has helped me more than anything else in the last weeks, and of all the roads to travel, this one offers the best promise of being a way out. It consists of two things: remembering that life is a gift, and learning how to relate to it; namely, by the discipline of gratitude.

A little something that happened years ago may help you understand what I mean. When World War II started, my family did not have a washing machine. One of my father's



younger business associates was drafted and his wife prepared to go with him, and we offered to let them store some of their furniture in our basement. Quite unexpectedly, they suggested that we use their washing machine while they were gone. "It would be better for it to be running," they said, "than sitting by idly and resting." So this is what we did, and I remember it helped a great deal. I used to like to watch the clothes churn around and then to run them through the wringer. Well, the years went by and the war finally ended, and our friends returned, and in the meantime, I forgot how the machine had come to be in our basement in the first place. At any rate, I recall resenting it pretty deeply when they took it out and I said so quite openly, and it was my mother who put the thing in perspective for me. She said, "Wait a minute, son. You need to remember, the machine never was ours in the first place. That we got to use it at all was a gift. So instead of being mad at its being taken away, let's use this occasion to be grateful that we had it at all."

Here, in a nutshell, is what it means to understand something as a gift and to handle it with gratitude, and this is the perspective Biblical religion puts around all of life. And I am here to testify that this is the only way down from the Mountain of Loss. I do not mean to say it makes things easy, for it does not, but at least it makes things bearable when I remember that Laura Lue was a gift, pure and simple, something I neither earned nor deserved nor had a right to, and that the appropriate response to a gift, even when it is taken away, is gratitude that I was ever given her in the first place. This is the discipline I am now trying to learn, even though it is very, very hard. Everywhere I turn I am surrounded by reminders of her — things we did together, things she said, things she loved. And in the presence of the reminders, I can do one of two things: I can dwell on the fact that she has been taken away, and dissolve in remorse that all of this is gone; or I can dwell on the fact that she was given to us at all, and learn to be grateful that we shared life, even though an all-too-short ten years. Only two choices, and believe me, the only way out is the way of gratitude. The way of remorse does not alter the stark reality one whit and only makes it worse. The way of gratitude does not alleviate the pain, but it somehow puts some light around the darkness and gives strength to begin to move.

Therefore, I repeat, do not look to me this morning as any authority on how to conquer the darkness, for I am still very much a broken-hearted brother in the depths of grief. However, if you do want to help me on down the way, I have only this one suggestion: do not counsel me not to question, and do not attempt to give me any total answer. The greatest things you can do is to remind me of two things: that life is gift — every last particle of it, and the way to

handle a gift is to be grateful. You can really help me out there if you will remind me of this, just as I hope maybe I may have helped this morning by reminding you.

There is only one way out as I see it — the way of gratitude. Will you join me in trying to learn how to travel that way?