

February 25, 2003

THE OBEDIENCE OF ABRAHAM

When God told Abraham to leave Ur, he left. When God told him to go into the land of Canaan, he went. When God told him to get ready to sacrifice Isaac, he prepared to do it; and he would have done it, had God not stayed his hand. God was impressed with Abraham's obedience, and He said to him,

“I swear by myself
that because you have done this
and have not withheld your son,
your only son,
I will surely bless you
and make your descendants as numerous
as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore.
Your descendants will take possession
of the cities of their enemies,
and through your offspring
all nations on earth will be blessed,
because you have obeyed me.”

Genesis 22:16-18 NIV

God was willing to bless Abraham because Abraham was willing to obey Him. For that reason, one must conclude that God sees great value in humans' being obedient.

WHAT GOD SAID TO ISAAC ABOUT ABRAHAM'S OBEDIENCE

A number of years after God made the above promise to Abraham, He warned Isaac not to go down to Egypt to escape a famine, as his father, Abraham, had done. God reminded Isaac of the oath that He (God) had sworn with respect to Abraham, because, as God said,

“Abraham obeyed me
and kept my requirements,
my commands, my decrees and my laws.”

Genesis 26:5 NIV

Sometimes people tend to downplay the importance of obedience to God, but God has never downplayed it.

OBEDIENCE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Obedience is one of the major themes of the Old Testament. God told the children of Israel to obey the commands that He had given to them through Moses. God said,

“If you follow my decrees
and are careful to obey my commands,
I will send you rain in its season,
and the ground will yield its crops
and the trees of the field their fruit.
Your threshing will continue until grape harvest
and the grape harvest will continue until planting,
and you will eat all the food you want
and live in safety in your land.”

Leviticus 26:3-5 NIV

God later told Joshua to obey the commands that He (God) had given through Moses, saying,

“Be strong and very courageous.
Be careful to obey all the law
my servant Moses gave you;
do not turn from it to the right or to the left,
that you may be successful wherever you go.”

Joshua 1:7 NIV

Much later, King David mentioned obedience, especially in the 119th Psalm, where David prayed (among others things),

“Give me understanding,
and I will keep your law
and obey it with all my heart.
Direct me in the path of your commands,
for there I find delight.”

Psalm 119:34-35 NIV

Jeremiah the prophet foretold great calamities that would certainly fall upon the children of Israel, since they had not kept the laws that God had given them (Jeremiah 9:13). God said,

“I will scatter them among nations
that neither they nor their fathers have known,
and I will pursue them with the sword
until I have destroyed them.”

Jeremiah 9:16 NIV

EMPHASIS ON OBEDIENCE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Many people have the mistaken idea that the Old Testament emphasizes obedience while the New Testament emphasizes only faith. Faith is, to be sure, prominent in the New Testament, but obedience is mentioned there, too.

Jesus had much to say about obedience. Jesus maintained that people who try out His teaching learn by experience that His teaching is from God. He said,

“If anyone chooses to do God’s will,
he will find out whether my teaching
comes from God
or whether I speak on my own.”

John 7:17 NIV

A person who hears Jesus’ words and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man, Jesus said, who builds his house on the “sand” (Matthew 7:26).

While Jesus was teaching people in a house, it was announced to him that his mother and brothers were standing outside and that they wanted to speak with him. Jesus asked the people in the house,

“Who are my mother and my brothers?”

Mark 3:33 NIV

Looking around at those who were seated and listening, He said to them,

“Here are my mother and my brothers!
Whoever does God’s will

is my brother and sister and mother.”

Mark 3:34a-35 NIV

This tells us that those who choose to do God's will are more closely related to Jesus than His own physical relatives were.

Love for Jesus is the best motivation that a person can have for doing what Jesus taught. He said,

“If you love me,
you will obey what I command.”

John 14:15 NIV

After Jesus had said this, He added:

“And I will ask the Father,
and he will give you another Counselor
to be with you forever--the Spirit of truth.”

John 14:16-17a NIV

Notice that this passage says that a person must obey what Jesus has commanded before Jesus will ask the Father to give the Holy Spirit to that person. A lot of people turn this around exactly the other way. They think that God must send them the Holy Spirit before they can begin to obey; but according to Jesus, people's obedience must begin first, before He will ask the Father to give them the Holy Spirit.

Some people use their love for Jesus and their (supposed) possession of the Holy Spirit as an excuse for refraining from doing what Jesus has said. That is a regrettable attitude. No one should think his or her love for Jesus makes it unnecessary to do what Jesus has said. The opposite is true. Love makes obedience all the more necessary. Those who love Jesus obey Him. Jesus said,

“He who does not love me
will not obey my teaching.
These words you hear are not my own;
they belong to the Father who sent me.”

John 14:24 NIV

Jesus taught that obedience is the way that a person can be sure that God loves him or her. This was how Jesus Himself was sure that God loved Him. Jesus said,

“If you obey my commands,
you will remain in my love,
just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands
and remain in his love.”

John 15:10 NIV

Jesus intended for his teaching to be obeyed by all. When He sent out His twelve apostles He told them to teach all people to obey what He had commanded them. He said,

“Therefore go
and make disciples of all nations,
baptizing them in the name of the Father
and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
and teaching them to obey everything
I have commanded you.
And surely I am with you always,
to the very end of the age.”

Matthew 28:19-20 NIV

If the apostles had not taught people to obey Jesus’ teaching, do you think that Jesus would have worked as closely with them as He did? Of course not. Do you think Jesus would work more closely with us today if we were more careful to do what He said?

No one needs ever feel that he or she is alone in this world; for if a person does what Jesus said to do, God will love that person and both He and the Father will make their home with that person. Jesus said,

“If anyone loves me,
he will obey my teaching.
My Father will love him,
and we will come to him
and make our home with him.”

John 14:23 NIV

Some people downplay the importance of obedience. They seem to think that feelings are more important than obedience. Some think that if they accept Jesus into their hearts and acknowledge Him as their personal Savior, that is all that is required. Or some think that if they trust that God has, for Christ’s sake, saved them from their sins, that is all that is necessary.

Some think that if they call on the name of the Lord to save them, that is all that is necessary. Such thinking is limited. Jesus said,

“Not everyone who says to me,
‘Lord, Lord,’
will enter the kingdom of heaven,
but only he who does the will of my Father
who is in heaven.”

Matthew 7:21 NIV

Jesus taught that only those who do God’s will get into “the kingdom of heaven” (that is, into heaven itself). No matter what people say, obedience is important, and it does have something to do with whether or not a person gets into heaven.

JESUS HIMSELF WAS OBEDIENT

Not only did Jesus speak of obedience, but He was also obedient Himself. He said,

“My food
is to do the will of him who sent me
and to finish his work.”

John 4:34 NIV

Again, Jesus said,

“For I have come down from heaven
not to do my
will but to do the will of him who sent me.”

John 6:38 NIV

The apostle Paul said of Jesus,

“And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death—
even death on a cross!”

Philippians 2:8 NIV

The book of Hebrews says of Jesus,

“Although he was a son,
he learned obedience
from what he suffered.”

Hebrews 5:8 NIV

JESUS AND ABRAHAM AGREED

Obedience to God was just as important to Jesus as it was to Abraham. Both were called upon to do difficult things: It was not easy for Abraham to pack up his goods and to leave his home in Ur. Nor was it easy for him to prepare to sacrifice his son, Isaac. By the same token, it was not easy for God’s Son to leave heaven or to die on the cross. Both Abraham and Jesus were prepared to do difficult things if God said for them to do them. They had this attitude because they loved God and wanted to please Him. Thus, Abraham and Jesus joined hands across the centuries—father and offspring—creature and creator—to testify to the importance of doing what God has said.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS:

1. Why is it, do you suppose, that God values obedience so much?
2. How can a person learn for himself whether or not Jesus’ teaching came from God? See John 7:17.
3. Is it necessary for a person to “obey the gospel?” See 2 Thessalonians 1:8.
4. How does a person obey the gospel?
5. How does a person get into Christ? See Romans 6:3.
6. How can a person be buried with Jesus? See Romans 6:4.
7. How can a person be sure that he or she will be resurrected with Jesus? See Romans 6:5.
8. Does God sometimes bless people in proportion to their obedience? Does this apply to families and to nations as well as to individuals?

9. If a person obeys Jesus, does it give that person confidence about his or her personal relationship with Jesus? If so, please explain. See John 15:10.

10. Will Jesus and the Father make their home with a person who does not do what Jesus said? See John 14:23.