

# St. Paul: On The Same page

*Lessons 02.22.15 Lent 1b*

## Day One: Genesis 22:1-18

*Then God said, 'Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there...'*

These are terribly hard words. In the debates about religion that rage back and forth on the internet, atheists like to cite this story as evidence against the Bible.

“How could you believe in a god who could be so cruel?” they ask. But Abraham did not live in a world like ours. Grace was unknown to him. People feared God because they knew that God could demand the sacrifice of their life. Earthly rulers had absolute power, and they often wielded it cruelly. Wouldn't God, who ruled over all nations and who had the power of the storms, the earth, and the stars, be even more fearful?

How should the true God teach his servant Abraham about his true nature?

God took Abraham from that world of law to a world of grace and peace. He took him

from a world in which even child sacrifice was not enough to ensure that you had pleased god, and he brought him to a world in which God was the one who did the sacrificing. He walked him to the brink of death in order to show him the gift of life.

In place of Isaac, God provided the lamb for the sacrifice. In the same way, God provided “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” to be sacrificed in our place.

It does seem like cruelty to put Abraham through this agony, but at the end of the story, Abraham is not allowed to sacrifice his son. Father and son walk back down the mountain together.

But at the cross God does not hold back. There is no last minute reprieve. God's son dies, in our place. It is we who walk away with a new life.

**Prayer:** *Heavenly Father, your sacrifice for us is shocking. How could you do it? That you would give your Son for me can only mean one thing, that your love for me is unimaginably great. Teach me to give you all that I have, and receive from you all that I need. Amen.*

## **Day Two: James 1:12-18**

*Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial... When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me."*

James talks about persecution and suffering as if they were good things. (vs.2 "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials...") How can that be?

Suffering is a bad thing. We all know that. In fact, we know it so well that we can't even explain why it's bad. It's like explaining why "up" is up or "down" is down. What is bad about suffering? That you have to suffer!

And yet... are you really certain that suffering is bad? What about "no pain, no gain?" What about "pain is the sign of weakness leaving the body?" Those are familiar slogans among athletes.

Even if you are not an Olympic competitor, you also endure small amounts of suffering in order to enjoy something good. You take unpleasant pills. You run or bike for miles. You deny yourself some of the foods you would like to eat. You go to work, and when you come

home you do laundry, make meals, wash dishes.

And not only do you do all these things, but you put your children through the same trials. School, tests, piano practice, homework, trying new foods, all of these are "good for you." They are unpleasant now, but they bring benefit later.

But how do we exercise our faith? How do we grow in our relationship and trust in our heavenly Father? It is by carrying spiritual burdens, lifting spiritual weight. And when we endure hardship, that is also when we see blessing in our lives that is greater than we would have imagined.

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials..." How has God allowed you to struggle and what did you gain from it?

**Prayer:** *Lord Jesus, I complain so quickly about inconvenience. I dream of a life without any unpleasant things. Teach me to not only persevere, but to rejoice in suffering, and to see the blessing that comes with it. Amen.*

### **Day Three: Mark 1:9-15**

*And a voice came from heaven:*

*“You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” At once the Spirit sent [Jesus] out into the desert...*

Three stories of testing: in the Old Testament lesson, God “tested” Abraham. He commanded him to sacrifice his only son, but in the end God provided the sacrifice himself.

In the epistle lesson, God says he doesn’t “tempt” us, but that he does allow us to undergo trials for our good, and we should rejoice because of it. The believers that James wrote to were persecuted for their faith.

In our Gospel lesson we hear how God loves his Son, and yet he sends him into the desert to endure temptation.

Jesus is presented three times with the opportunity to escape hunger, poverty, and obscurity. He can have good things easily, without sacrifice... except that he would have to give up his obedience to his Father. What sustains him when he doesn’t have food or friends?

What sustains you? Jesus was in the wilderness alone for

40 days. Sometimes we go through an entire period of time that tests us. School, band camp, basic training, or perhaps hospitalization, rehab, probation. Many of us can point to an entire year in our life that was especially hard. That was the year we suffered several losses, broke up with someone we loved, lost a job, or fought through an illness.

Afterward, looking back, we talk about what a hard year that was, but we got through. Something sustained us.

When have you been “in the desert”? And what kept you going and brought you through?

Jesus says it is the word and promises of God that will help us. It is the presence of God that lifts us up. Even in the middle of the “valley of the shadow of death,” our Shepherd is there to set a table for us and to protect us.

Whatever trial you face today, you are not alone. You have God’s promise and his presence, to lead you through.

**Prayer:** *Lord Jesus, you went into the desert for me. Now Lord, go with me into my desert and guide me. Amen.*

## Day Four: Psalm 23

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*

Do you ever fall into the trap of comparing troubles? Your friend is droning on and on about her husband and how he has let her down, but you're thinking about your own marriage or your own disappointments, how life hasn't gone where you thought it would.

Your wife is telling you about all the troubles of her day. She's hoping that you'll give her some encouragement or affection. (No, she's not asking you to fix everything.) But the whole time you are nodding your head, but you're thinking about all your troubles at work, your fatigue, your sense of being the one who is carrying the weight of the world.

Objectively, we know it's not true. Lots of people have troubles greater than ours. But it doesn't feel that way. It feels like we're all alone in our troubles. It feels like we're in a desert of our own, isolated

and starving, thirsty for someone who understands.

We often wish that God would take away the problems. Give us a solution. But the REAL problem we want solved is this sense of being alone. And that is exactly what God offers us so freely.

"I will fear no evil, for you are with me," David said. And all the rest of his psalm says the same. Not that God will defeat his enemies, but that he would be there. That he would break bread with him even in the midst of his enemies. That he would walk with him. That his mercy would follow him, and that David would live with him forever.

This is the meaning of Jesus' promise, that he would send "the Comforter," the Holy Spirit, to be with us. Literally, it means the one who will come alongside us.

Are your burdens heavier than others are bearing? Perhaps in some ways they are. But your comfort is the same. The one who can lift you up is with you.

**Prayer:** *Lord Jesus, walk with me in the desert. Stay with me in the darkness. Lead me into the light. Amen.*