

THE GOSPEL IN STEP 3

Introduction

I am really enjoying preparing this series on *The Gospel in the Twelve Steps*. The more we understand just how much God is for us, and at work in us, the more successful our recovery from sin can be. I'm enjoying this because it's good for me – good for my soul, and good for me to really work at pointing us to the Gospel that we all know is inherent in the Steps.

A quick review – the Gospel in step 1 was this: Victory in Christ starts with surrender to Christ. When we admit we are powerless to control our behavior, that our lives are unmanageable, we lay down our arms, we leave the enemy camp, and approach the camp of the risen, victorious Christ, ready to submit to his will, even if we don't know what that looks like yet. Step 2: Healing from Christ starts with hope in Christ. This is what it means when the step says, "We came to believe." Our hope has been in anything but Christ, but we now begin to believe that it may just be Christ who restores us to sanity. Based on that hope, we now come to step 3:

"We made a decision to turn our wills and our lives over to the care of God." And here's the Gospel in step 3: **God has made a decision to care for us.** You have to know this – why would you turn your wills and your lives over to care of someone who was not for you; who was not committed to you; who was not faithful to you; not trustworthy?

But our God is for you; he is committed to you; he is faithful, and he is trustworthy. God made a decision to care for you a long time ago – this is the

Gospel. Do you see how it is the Gospel that will motivate you to make that decision?

Step 3 is an action step – you’re making a decision; a commitment. I’ll boil it down to this: **trust Christ’s work, do your work.** The Scripture that ties to this step is Rom 12:1: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship.”

“In view of God’s mercy” – recognize, believe and trust that God has been merciful to you, by enacting a plan of salvation for you. **Trust Christ’s work.** “Offer your bodies as living sacrifices” – offer your life; offer the thing or person that is most important to you, the thing or person you have been unable to let go of. This is the sacrifice God calls you to make. **Do your work.** It’s an act of worship.

God Keeps His Promises

God has made a decision to care for you. And he acted on this decision by making a promise a long time ago. The theological term for a promise that God makes is called a **covenant**. And he made this promise, this covenant, with Abraham, way back in the book of Genesis. And we are the beneficiaries of that promise, as we’ll see.

Here’s a brief picture of God’s work in Abraham’s life:

Gen 12:1-3: God calls Abraham to leave his family, and settle in the land of Canaan, and promises him that he will be a great nation. Abraham (named Abram at that point) obediently goes.

Gen 15:1-6: The Lord appears to Abram in a vision and again promises he will be a great nation and Abram says, "How? I have no children." And God says, "You will have your own son who will be your heir, and you will have descendants as numerous as the stars." Abraham was about 76 at this point. He probably looks down at his body, says to himself, "I don't see it happening," but the text says this: "Abram believed God, and he credited to him as righteousness - a really important verse in all the Bible - God declares us righteous because we believe in him, not because we have done anything to earn our righteousness.

Ten years go by - no child. Sarai, Abram's wife, decides to take matters into her own hands (don't we do that - believe God, but get frustrated with his time frame, and try to execute his will when it's really our will we're interested in?), and gives Abram her concubine, Hagar, and she bears a son named Ishmael. Apparently this is the son God had promised.

Thirteen more years go by. God appears to Abram, reaffirms his covenantal promise to him by changing his name to Abraham and says, "The son I promised will be born by your wife Sarah, about a year from now." And it happened - God kept his promise!

Their son's name was Isaac, which means, "He laughs." Now if I were Abraham, 100 yrs old, looking at my wife, Sarah, who is now 90, I'd be laughing, too. But no doubt God instructed them to name him Isaac, because it had to make God laugh to do something so utterly impossible in the eyes of man, and to watch their reaction of amazement and wonder. With God, nothing is impossible.

God kept his promise. God keeps his promises. Do you believe this? I know how desperate some of your circumstances are – long-term addiction, repeated failures, bad marriages, failed marriages, jail time, and loneliness. But Abraham’s situation appeared pretty desperate, too. And God kept his promise.

Let me connect God’s promise to Abraham with us. Paul says this is Galatians 3: ¹³ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”— ¹⁴ so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith. Verse 29: And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.

We are heirs – we will inherit the kingdom of God, simply because we are in Christ. We have received the promised Spirit. We are children of God because we have been born again of the Spirit. We are saved by grace through faith, and the Spirit enables that faith. Our chains are gone, we are alive in Christ, and the Spirit gives us the strength to fight the battles God calls us to fight - all because God kept his promise to Abraham. God keeps his promises. He is trustworthy, so trust him! Now!

Genesis 22:1-19

God Tests, God Provides

If you’ve been paying attention, you ought to be saying, “Wait a minute. You just proved to us that God keeps his promises. I’m just about ready to trust him, and now we read that Abraham has to kill his only son, as some kind of test?”

I will tell you that God used this to get my attention, about twelve years ago, as we were studying this chapter in BSF. My son was struggling with addiction, but I just kept trying harder to fix him, to control the situation. And I remember clearly thinking, “I know God is calling me to trust my son to him, but I can’t do this. I could take him part-way up the mountain, three-quarters, maybe, but then I’d go back down.” My faith was not strong enough yet – I was trying, I was growing, but I didn’t have Abraham’s faith. And Eric continued to struggle.

But there are two important truths about God in this passage: **God tests, and God provides** – both hugely important.

Note how Abraham does not flinch – he says to God, “Here I am.” He trusts, but that doesn’t mean he wasn’t scared or perplexed. Isaac was the most important person to Abraham. He was the key to all that God promised. He was a miracle baby, an answer to prayer that God took 24 years to answer.

The test is this – trust me with the big thing; trust me with what you can’t do without; trust me with the life of the one you love most. Oh, that’s a big test.

I couldn’t do it with Eric – as I look at the steps, I realize I hadn’t worked step 2 yet. My hope was still in myself, in my ability to love my son through his problem. My hope was not yet in Christ, and so I couldn’t work step 3 – I could not turn all of my life (especially my son) to the care of God.

Now I know a lot of you very well. I know how desperate a lot of your situations are. I also know that God is for you. I was praying, and asking God, “what do you want to say to these people from this passage?” And this is what he said: “I

will test you because I love you. I will test you because I know the person you can become. I will test you to strengthen you, and to grow your faith.”

Abraham was not being judged or punished – God loved him, and desperately wanted to see Abraham put his faith in action.

God was not trying to keep Abraham down, nor was he playing games. Abraham would become the father of many nations, and this was the process to make that happen.

And perhaps Isaac had become a bit of idol for Abraham. The text does not tell us that, but how could he not be? God will not tolerate any idolatry, and so he used this test to strengthen Abraham’s faith.

No matter your circumstances, if you are in Christ (are you?), you are children of Abraham and beneficiaries of God’s promises to him, which means:

God is not judging or punishing you. He will use the pain of your decisions and consequences to draw you to him, all because he loves you.

He knows the man or woman you can be, and will sometimes test you to help you develop into that person.

And he knows your faith needs to be exercised, just like a muscle.

And God provides. This is so much more than just providing a way out, although that’s important. The Bible affirms that God will not test you beyond what you can handle – that’s good, but not easy to believe for some of us. Much better is **what** God provides.

He provides a lamb. He provides a lamb on a mountain that would one day be the ground for God’s temple. He provides a lamb to be sacrificed, in other

words, in Jerusalem. He provides a lamb as a substitute for Isaac. When the apostle John first saw Jesus coming, he said, “Behold the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” God provides the lamb as a substitute for Isaac, but it points to Jesus Christ, the Lamb who was sacrificed as our substitute.

Still wondering if you can really trust God with your will and your life? Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son because he knew somehow that God would make it right – he didn’t know how, but he knew. And that’s all God needed to know. Abraham didn’t have to sacrifice his son, because God sacrificed his.

There is nothing that God asks us to do that can compare with what he did – the Trinity, the Godhead, three-in-one, ripped apart as Jesus died. It is pain and loss of cosmic proportions. Your test is light and momentary compared to the test God required of his son – perfect faithfulness, willing to become sin, to descend into hell. And Jesus passed the test! God keeps his promises. Jesus kept his.

² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Do Not Grow Weary

³ Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

Trust Christ’s Work, Do Your Work

As we said, step 3 is an action step – we make a decision; we act on what we believe. It is faith in action. James says this about Abraham in ch. 2:

²¹ Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. ²³ And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend. ²⁴ You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

Here's the work Abraham did:

- He was resolute. When God called, he said, "Here I am." He gathered supplies to build the altar on which he would kill his son. He journeyed three days, no doubt his mind racing, but his mind was made up – God would somehow provide.
- He moved – one step at a time. It had to be hard to make that trip, but he simply kept moving.
- He worshipped – or was ready to worship. He trusted God so much that he viewed the sacrifice of his son as a time of worship. He was ready to sing about how great God is and how much he has done! He sure wasn't grumbling.
- He sacrificed – the fact that the knife was raised, poised, and the angel had to quickly intervene (Abraham! Abraham!) – he effectively accomplished his task.

Simply put, he obeyed – as James says, his faith was made complete by what he did. James says negatively, a few verses earlier, "what good is it my brothers, if a man says he has faith, but has no works? Can such faith save him?" But saving faith is faith that shows itself in action.

I got to a place where I could let go of my son, sacrifice him, so to speak, and God blessed my obedience by growing and strengthening my faith and by making himself very real to me.

Here's a picture for you – it's the rowboat of salvation. When you are in Christ, you are in the rowboat of salvation, a rowboat that will never capsize until

it reaches its destination. But you have to row it, with two oars – the oar of faith and the oar of action.

You step in the boat, desiring to leave the land of the old you. That's an important decision with eternal significance. But you won't get away from the old you unless you row, and row with both oars – the oar of faith (trusting Christ's work) and the oar of action (doing your work).

If you spend your life proclaiming how good God is, while stuck in the misery of your addiction or toxic relationship, it's like rowing with just the oar of faith. You will go in circles, and never make progress in distancing yourself from the old you. Your faith without action is useless.

And, if you spend your life trying harder and harder to do the right thing, to be better, feeling the pressure to perform, to be perfect, you are only rowing the oar of action. There is no real trust in Christ, and you will go in circles as well.

But when you row with both oars, you make progress! It's awesome! You begin to move away from the shore of the old you. The tide will try to suck you back to shore, but your muscles get stronger as you use them, and pretty soon you're past the tide! And you experience calm seas when progress is real, and you experience storms and waves which threaten to capsize you, but you're doing it, and Jesus is in the boat, saying, "I knew you could do it!"

This is recovery – rowing with both oars, in the rowboat called salvation, distancing yourself from the old you. And Jesus, and his people encourage you along the way.

So what's the work you're called to do in step 3? Follow Abraham's example:

- Be resolute – make a decision, and stick to it. Remember the gospel principle that God has already made the decision to care for you.
- Move – one step at a time; one meeting at a time, one day, one hour at a time, but keep moving. It's how you exercise your faith and grow stronger.
- Worship – praise God, even when you don't feel like it. Get in the habit of worship. Recovery exists because worship doesn't. Worship with us, worship on Sunday mornings, worship in your quiet time with God, but worship. Praise God for who he is; praise God for what he has done; praise Jesus Christ for passing the test, for being our perfect sacrifice.
- Sacrifice what you love most – work hard to give it up, completely to God.

The gospel in step 3 is this: God has made a decision to care for your wills and lives.

If **God** has done this, the **God** who did not hold back the sacrifice of his son, you can trust him, and you can do the work he's called you to do.

22 After these things **God tested Abraham** and 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 of which I shall tell 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. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. ⁴ On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. ⁵ Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and **worship** and come again to you.” ⁶ And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. ⁷ And Isaac said to his father Abraham, “My father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” ⁸ Abraham said, “**God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.**” So they went both of them together.

⁹ When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter 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, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” ¹³ And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴ So Abraham called the name of that place, “**The LORD will provide**”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.”

¹⁵ And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven ¹⁶ and said, “By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, ¹⁸ and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, **because you have obeyed my voice.**”