

Faith That Lets Go:
Abraham and the Foreshadow of the Jesus Way
By Joshua Choonmin Kang
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Joshua Kang practices what he preaches: transformation into Christ-likeness by letting go of false securities and becoming deeply rooted in Christ. Ever since he was converted and called to be a pastor at the age of 17, he begins his day with the Lord through the "daybreak" service—every single day for more than 35 years. Because of his unique devotional time with the Lord, his message is simple but strong. He is also a "dreamer" who values the invisible aspects more than the visible elements of life. That's why he focuses on spirituality. Joshua Kang is a marvelous person to talk about Abraham, faith and the Jesus way of relinquishment with great joy.

Abraham is often considered as "the father of faith." Eugene Peterson, in his wonderful book *The Jesus Way*, starts with Abraham's faith story to show how our faith ancestors pointed to Jesus through their life.

In the story of Abraham's faith, Eugene Peterson takes us to Mount Moriah, where Abraham was tested. The event that took place there is the most important episode in the entire life of Abraham. It demonstrates his faith in God and his consistent walk in the ways of the Lord.

For Korean people, the event that took place at Mount Moriah has a special meaning. It is a very impressive and touching event. In any culture shaped by Confucius, especially in Korean culture, having a son, especially an "only son," is very important because we have a patriarchal tradition.

Although it is not so in today's Korean culture, in the past, if a woman couldn't give birth to a son, she would be mistreated by the entire family and even abandoned by her husband. When the wife could not give birth to a son, the husband had the right to desert her and the responsibility to take a new wife to have a son to carry on the family line. It was a very sad and miserable culture, but not unlike ancient Hebrew culture.

I don't have a son. I have two daughters. Sometimes, my associate pastors who have sons tease me by misapplying the scripture from 1 John 5:12. "He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son (of God) does not have life."

In Korea, military service is compulsory. But if a young man is the only son for the second or third generation of the family line, he is exempt. Being an only son is *that* important.

When God commanded Abraham to offer up his only son, imagine how appalling the request was! Abraham was in great shock; Sarah's shock must have been even greater. In fact, for Abraham, Isaac was not the only son. He had Ishmael. But Sarah had no other son. (The Bible keeps silent about how Abraham explained God's command to Sarah. I guess Sarah must have cried all night long when she heard it.)

Nevertheless, Abraham obeyed God. But he must have endured a very painful time up to the point of his obedience. The night before he left for Mount Moriah, Abraham must have prayed a prayer of anguish. But it ended the same as the prayer Jesus prayed at Gethsemane: "Not by my will, but Your will..."

At Gethsemane, Jesus had already died [to himself] when he prayed the prayer—even before he took the cross at Golgotha. Likewise, Isaac had already died in Abraham's heart as Abraham prayed the prayer like Jesus' prayer at Gethsemane.

As they approached the God-designated place, Abraham looked up and saw Mount Moriah in the distance. There, Abraham made a very interesting statement to his young servants. He told his servants, "We will worship, and then we will come back to you." If Abraham didn't believe that God would return Isaac to Abraham alive, he would not have dared to use the plural subject "we" when he spoke to his servants. Abraham had strong faith about the resurrection of the body deep down in his heart.

Abraham was silent for those three days, all the way to Mount Moriah, just as God kept silent for the three days while Jesus, His only son, was dead and buried after the crucifixion. Both fathers, God and Abraham, kept silent before their sons' death.

However, there was faith in the father's heart. Abraham believed God and believed in the resurrection of his son. At Mount Moriah, where we witness the astounding event of Abraham's testing, we encounter Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection from different perspectives.

At 100 years old, Abraham's body was nearly dead already. It was the same with Sarah. She was past the age of childbearing. Both their bodies were, in a sense, "dead." But God had come to them and resurrected their bodies. When it was impossible for their bodies to produce a child, the Spirit of God came upon them and touched them, allowing Isaac to be conceived by the power of the Spirit of God, just as Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit. In that way, Abraham experienced the resurrection of his own body once and became the first person in human history to believe in the resurrection of the body.

Abraham was a man of faith. He is called a father of faith. His was the faith of hoping against hope¹. He believed God's promise that he would become a father of nations when no one believed he would have a son.

Abraham, as he offered up Isaac to God, believed God would resurrect Isaac from death. Abraham's faith was the faith of confession. When God changed his name from Abram to Abraham, He gave Abraham the faith of confession: confessing with his lips. That's what happened at Mount Moriah. When he confessed his faith of resurrection with his own lips by saying, "We will return together," that confession of faith brought forth the very miracle he experienced.

When Abraham offered up Isaac to God, he heard the voice of the Lord. "Abraham, Abraham! Do not lay a hand on the boy! Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."²

Right at that moment, the ram prepared by God came to Abraham's sight. The ram must have been there when Abraham arrived to offer up Isaac, but Abraham could not see it until he offered up Isaac to the Lord.

Unless we offer up the most precious things in our life, we cannot see the best thing God has prepared for us, just as Abraham could not see the ram God had prepared until he gave up his beloved son Isaac.

Also, to Isaac the event at Mount Moriah must have been a most wondrous and mysterious experience—he heard the voice of the Lord for the first time. Before, Isaac had heard about God's promise for him from his father, Abraham. But there at Mount Moriah, Isaac could hear God's voice directly. Isaac, too, was there to hear God's promise, and he realized God's promise to his father was also about him.

But it wasn't just what they heard that was important. It was also what they saw. And do you know what Abraham and Isaac saw—and foresaw—at Mount Moriah? They foresaw Golgotha. Abraham was the first person to experience how painful it would be for a father to sacrifice his only son. He was the first person who knew the heart of the father who gave up his only son. For that very reason God loved Abraham. Because God Himself had a plan to sacrifice His only Son in the future, He loved Abraham, who understood the Father's heart. Isn't that why God called Abraham a "friend"? A friend shares the same feeling.

Abraham's faith way was a faith of relinquishing himself. It would have been much easier to sacrifice himself than Isaac, his beloved son. Isaac was everything to Abraham; he was God's future and God's promise. And God was commanding him to give up that future and promise. Abraham, without reluctance, obeyed God and relinquished Isaac from his heart. Sarah also emptied Isaac, her everything, from her own heart.

Relinquishing oneself is one of the most important elements in the spiritual formation process. Relinquishment in this context means emptying oneself, offering up the most precious and most beloved thing to God. Before we receive God's love into our lives, we must give up ourselves first. When Abraham gave up Isaac to God, God not only returned Isaac alive, but also prepared the ram as a sacrifice in place of Isaac.

Our God always wants to give us the best, but we are so impatient that we grow satisfied with the alternatives. Abraham had attempted to appoint Eliezer, his servant, to inherit his estate, but God insisted that a son from Abraham's own body would be his heir.

Here's the principle for you and me: If we wait patiently, holding what is precious to us with open palms, we are able to receive God's best and experience God's joy.

In fact, what God wanted to give Abraham was much better than Isaac. It was the ram. It was Jesus Christ. Many times, because our minds are occupied by the gifts we have in our hands now, we often forget

¹. Romans 4:18.

². Genesis 22:12, NRSV.

who gives the gifts. We tend to care more about the gifts and neglect the giver. God's plan was not only Isaac, but also the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing Jesus' day, and he saw it and was glad.³

Abraham always "looked up." He looked up at the stars in the heavens, looked up at the ram, and looked up at Golgotha. In the end, he saw that what God really desired to give him and us was the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ.

Mount Moriah was where the act of redemption took place for the first time. The ram was sacrificed in place of Isaac. Jesus was sacrificed instead of you and me. We must be able to foresee the hill of Golgotha from the summit of Mount Moriah, where we can see all sides—the whole picture. We can see the past of Abraham at the summit of Mount Moriah—God's calling Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldeans, Abraham's obedience, Abraham's lying about his wife, Sarah, to save his own life, and so on.

Abraham was not a perfect person, but God had such confidence in Abraham that He constantly persuaded him; it was God's grace for Abraham. Abraham was not patient even after he received God's promise, but God continuously persuaded Abraham and grew his faith. God didn't give up on him.

Our God is a patient God, a waiting God. The faith Abraham displayed at Mount Moriah was not formed in one day. It was a lifelong process for Abraham to grow the amazing faith that enabled him to offer up his beloved Isaac to God. Likewise, our becoming conformed to the character of Jesus doesn't take place in one day.

The Jesus way that Abraham foresaw began from Mount Moriah. Abraham, a man of worship, knew with certainty that the time of worship in truth and spirit, which would transcend the law and the temple, would come. He knew salvation wouldn't come from the law, but from faith alone. He understood the "gospel" that salvation comes through faith.

When Abraham offered up Isaac to the Lord, God blessed him and promised him that all nations would be blessed through him; he would become a channel of God's blessings. Right at Mount Moriah, Abraham "fore-received" the Great Commission as he heard the voice of the Lord about world evangelism and world missions—salvation for all nations.

In 1884, American missionaries came to Korea and shared the gospel with the Korean people. Many Korean people received the gospel and were saved. Because of the gospel they shared, Korean churches became missionary-sending churches. Because of the very gospel preached by American missionaries, I became a pastor and could stand before you to preach the gospel today.

We are thankful for the American churches' sending missionaries to Korea. We are especially grateful for pastors Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, and Eugene Peterson, for their love and concern for Korean churches to share this opportunity of introducing the RENOVARÉ spiritual formation conference to us, the Korean people.

In our spiritual formation process, the Jesus way is the most important way. All glory to Jesus!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Joshua Choonmin Kang is a pastor and spiritual director whose heart always focuses on one's "being and becoming" rather than doing. He is known as "Richard Foster" in the Korean Christian community for his books on Christian spirituality and is a contributor to the RENOVARÉ Spiritual Formation Study Bible. As a highly respected writer, he has written 33 books in Korean.

³ John 8:56.

*Joshua Choonmin Kang has beautifully applied the story of Abraham to the process of authentic transformation in his book **Deep Rooted in Christ: The Way of Transformation**. The following is an excerpt from the first chapter, “Begin With Emptiness.”*

Most of us long for transformation but are afraid of change. Yet spiritual formation begins when we empty our lives. Our spiritual formation begins not with fullness but with emptiness. That’s the way we follow Jesus, who “emptied himself, taking on the form of a slave, being born in human likeness” (Philippians 2:7).

Even Jesus had to make space for God’s action in his life. He had a privileged status, but he relinquished it; he let it go. It’s the same with us. We have to empty ourselves. Only then can we begin to be filled up with the blessings of God.

What do we mean by emptying ourselves? How can we connect with this need to give ourselves away?

Let’s look first at the figure of Abraham. Abraham began by departing, by leaving home in response to God’s command. His departure wasn’t just a matter of location. He had to abandon whatever he knew best: his safe haven, his comfort zone.

This is what God is asking us to do as well. He wants us to let go of our old country and enter into the new life he has in mind for us. But abandoning our comfort zones can be terrifying. When we let go of the world we know, we’re going to experience pain, suffering and fear.

The letting go takes place in the spiritual realm. That is where the deeper journey is made. This deeper journey is a life-passage of abandonment: letting go of our old ways to find the new; emptying ourselves as preparation for receiving the grace God will pour into us.

Abraham can encourage us when we see how he trusted God.

He was ordered to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice. Isaac was the promise of God. He was God’s promise fulfilled. And so he became Abraham’s love, his passion. But it seems that this love for his son took over his heart, taking precedence over his love for God. So God’s command to sacrifice the boy was really a call for Abraham to refocus his heart on God.

Abraham had to empty his heart. He had filled his heart with something other than God. And when he did so, he made room, room for God’s abundant blessing. He became a friend of God through surrender.

Abraham is the first biblical story about relinquishment, but certainly not the last. He tasted what God the Father would experience when he allowed his Son to die on the cross. The Father’s heart was filled with the Son he loved, but he emptied his heart for our sake to gain the salvation of humankind.

In this same way many great leaders became God’s servants. They emptied themselves, abandoned themselves, filled their hearts with nothing but God. And when they departed for the next world, we found the great imprints they left in this world.

We too must open our hands and let go. For the sake of eternal blessings, we must give up earthly things.

The great missionary Jim Elliot said it well. People who exchange what they can’t keep to gain what they can’t lose are no fools.

Are our hands clasped too tightly around what we already have? Will we never receive the great things God wants to give us?

To catch the blessings God tosses our way every day, we simply have to open our hands, stretch out our arms.