

HOLDING THE LINE

A Five-Part Men's Bible Study

Session 5 — Real Obedience Has a Cost

Main Passage: Genesis 22:1–14

Supporting Scripture: Luke 9:23–25; Matthew 19:16–22; 1 Samuel 15:22; Daniel 3:13–18; Philippians 3:7–8; Romans 12:1–2

Main Idea:

Obedience is easy when it costs us nothing. Real obedience is revealed when following God requires us to surrender something we value, accept an outcome we cannot control, or remain faithful when obedience becomes uncomfortable.

OPENING

We've spent four sessions talking about what it means to hold the line.

In Session 1, Elijah taught us:

Strong men get tired.

God doesn't shame exhausted men.

He restores them.

In Session 2, Nehemiah taught us:

Stand your post.

Know what God has entrusted to you and remain faithful there.

In Session 3, we learned:

Not everything belongs in our hands.

Do what belongs to you.

Leave God's responsibilities with God.

In Session 4, Israel stood at the Red Sea and God said:

Go forward.

Eventually faith has to move.

Now we reach the final question.

What happens when obedience costs you something?

It's easy to obey God when His direction agrees with ours.

It's easy to trust Him when the outcome looks good.

It's easy to say:

"God, I'll follow You anywhere"

when the road is headed exactly where we wanted to go.

But sooner or later every man who seriously follows God encounters something harder.

God's direction and ours separate.

And suddenly obedience has a price.

That's where we discover something about ourselves.

Do I trust God?

Or do I trust God only when He agrees with me?

1. ABRAHAM HAD WAITED A LONG TIME FOR ISAAC

Read Genesis 22:1–2.

To understand this passage, we have to remember who Isaac is.

God had promised Abraham descendants.

Years passed.

Abraham got older.

Sarah got older.

Humanly speaking, the promise became increasingly impossible.

Then Isaac was born.

Isaac wasn't simply Abraham's son.

Isaac represented the promise.

Abraham had waited years for him.

He had prayed for him.

Hoped for him.

Held him as a baby.

Watched him grow.

Then God says:

“Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest...”

Scripture emphasizes the relationship.

Your son.

Your only son.

The one you love.

Then God tells Abraham to take Isaac to Moriah.

This isn't an abstract theological exercise anymore.

This is personal.

2. GOD TESTS WHAT ABRAHAM TRUSTS

Genesis 22 begins by telling us:

“God did tempt Abraham...”

In this context, the meaning is that God tested Abraham.

God isn't trying to discover information.

God knows Abraham.

The test reveals the condition of Abraham's faith.

There is a difference between:

Receiving God's blessings.

And:

Trusting the God who gave them.

That's something we need to examine.

God gives us good things.

Marriage.

Children.

Careers.

Businesses.

Homes.

Money.

Abilities.

Relationships.

Influence.

Opportunities.

Dreams.

None of those things are inherently wrong.

Many are blessings from God.

But a blessing can become an idol when we decide:

"God, You can have everything except this."

Sometimes the clearest way to discover what owns our heart is to ask:

What am I unwilling to place in God's hands?

3. ABRAHAM GETS UP

Read Genesis 22:3.

This verse is remarkable because of what isn't there.

No argument is recorded.

No bargaining.

No delay.

Scripture says:

"And Abraham rose up early in the morning..."

Then he prepares.

He saddles the donkey.

He gathers the wood.

He takes Isaac.

And he goes.

Think about Session 4.

Faith requires action.

Abraham doesn't simply say:

"I trust God."

He gets up.

Real obedience eventually becomes visible.

There comes a moment when faith leaves our mouth and enters our feet.

Abraham starts walking.

4. OBEDIENCE DOESN'T REQUIRE COMPLETE UNDERSTANDING

Imagine what Abraham must have been wrestling with.

God promised descendants through Isaac.

Now God has commanded something Abraham cannot reconcile with that promise.

Hebrews 11 gives us some insight.

Read Hebrews 11:17–19.

Abraham apparently reasoned that God could raise Isaac from the dead if necessary.

That's extraordinary.

Abraham didn't understand how God would keep His promise.

But he trusted that God would.

That's faith.

Sometimes we think faith means understanding God's plan.

It doesn't.

Sometimes faith means saying:

"I don't understand this, but I trust the One who does."

That's very different.

5. "GOD WILL PROVIDE"

Read Genesis 22:6–8.

Isaac notices something.

They have fire.

They have wood.

But there's no lamb.

So Isaac asks his father:

"Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"

Abraham answers:

"My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering."

Abraham still doesn't know exactly what God is going to do.

But he keeps walking.

God will provide.

Sometimes that's all we have.

Not:

I understand.

Not:

I know how this ends.

Not:

I'm comfortable.

Not:

This makes sense.

Just:

God will provide.

6. OBEDIENCE BECOMES REAL AT THE ALTAR

Read Genesis 22:9–10.

This is where the story becomes difficult.

Abraham builds the altar.

He arranges the wood.

He binds Isaac.

He places him on the altar.

Then Abraham reaches for the knife.

There is a point in obedience where theory ends.

You can talk about surrender all day.

Eventually something has to be placed on the altar.

That's the question:

What's on your altar?

What have you told God belongs to Him while keeping one hand wrapped around it?

Your money?

Your business?

Your reputation?

Your plans?

Your children?

Your relationship?

Your pride?

Your anger?

Your need to be right?

Your future?

Your comfort?

Your image?

Your control?

Maybe even the version of your life you expected to have.

Surrender isn't saying:

"God, You can have it."

Surrender is opening your hand.

7. GOD STOPS ABRAHAM

Read Genesis 22:11–12.

The angel of the Lord calls:

“Abraham, Abraham.”

Abraham answers:

“Here am I.”

Then:

“Lay not thine hand upon the lad...”

God never intended for Abraham to complete the sacrifice.

This matters.

The test wasn't about destroying Isaac.

It was about whether Abraham trusted God more than the promise God had given him.

Abraham had spent years waiting for Isaac.

But Isaac could never become more important than the God who gave him.

That's the danger with blessings.

Sometimes we begin worshiping the gift instead of the Giver.

8. THERE WAS A RAM

Read Genesis 22:13–14.

Abraham looks up.

There is a ram caught in the thicket.

The provision was already there.

Abraham calls the place:

Jehovah-jireh.

The LORD will provide.

Abraham couldn't see the ram when he started walking.

He couldn't see it while climbing the mountain.

He couldn't see it while building the altar.

But God had already made provision.

There will be times in our lives when we cannot see what God is doing.

That doesn't mean God isn't doing anything.

God's provision does not depend upon our ability to see it.

Sometimes we don't see the ram until we've reached the altar.

9. OBEDIENCE DOES NOT GUARANTEE COMFORT

We need to be careful here.

The lesson of Genesis 22 isn't:

“Obey God and everything will work out exactly the way you want.”

Sometimes obedience costs something and you don't get it back.

The apostles discovered that.

So did countless believers throughout Scripture.

Jesus Himself says in Luke 9:23:

“If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.”

A cross isn't comfortable.

Following Christ sometimes costs.

Relationships may change.

People may misunderstand you.

You may lose opportunities.

You may have to admit you were wrong.

You may have to forgive someone who doesn't deserve it.

You may have to walk away from something profitable because it isn't right.

You may have to tell the truth when lying would be easier.

You may have to surrender something you desperately wanted.

Real obedience has a cost.

10. “BUT IF NOT”

One of the strongest examples of this comes from three men standing before a king.

Read Daniel 3:16–18.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are threatened with the furnace.

Their answer is incredible.

They tell Nebuchadnezzar that God is able to deliver them.

Then they say:

“But if not...”

Those may be three of the strongest words of faith in Scripture.

God can save us.

But if not...

We're still not bowing.

That's mature faith.

Immature faith says:

“I'll obey God because He'll give me the outcome I want.”

Mature faith says:

“I'll obey God because He is God.”

Even if the outcome hurts.

Even if I don't understand.

Even if He doesn't answer the way I hoped.

Even if obedience costs me something.

But if not, I'm still not bowing.

11. SOMETIMES THE COST IS YOUR PRIDE

Not every altar involves something dramatic.

Sometimes obedience costs you an apology.

And for some men, that's expensive.

"I was wrong."

"I shouldn't have said that."

"I hurt you."

"Will you forgive me?"

Sometimes obedience costs you the need to win an argument.

Sometimes it costs your reputation.

Sometimes it costs money.

Sometimes it costs convenience.

Sometimes it means setting aside something you want because your family needs something else.

Sometimes it means admitting you need help.

Sometimes it means forgiving someone when you'd rather remain angry.

Sometimes it means doing the right thing when nobody would ever know if you didn't.

The question isn't whether obedience costs something.

Eventually it will.

The question is:

What is faithfulness worth to you?

12. OBEDIENCE IS BETTER THAN RELIGIOUS APPEARANCE

Read 1 Samuel 15:22.

Samuel tells Saul:

"To obey is better than sacrifice..."

Saul had disobeyed God and then tried to dress it up in religious language.

That's something human beings are very good at.

We rationalize.

We explain.

We justify.

We find reasons why our situation is different.

We can even make disobedience sound spiritual.

But God isn't impressed by religious appearance while we're ignoring what He actually told us.

You can attend church.

Know Scripture.

Sing worship songs.

Pray publicly.

Lead Bible studies.

Serve people.

Give money.

And still have an area of your life where you've told God:

"Not this."

Religious activity cannot substitute for obedience.

13. WHAT ARE YOU HOLDING BACK?

This entire study has brought us here.

Session 1 asked:

What is exhausting you?

Session 2 asked:

What has God entrusted to you?

Session 3 asked:

What are you carrying that belongs to God?

Session 4 asked:

Where is God telling you to move?

Now Session 5 asks:

What are you unwilling to surrender?

Maybe there's nothing obvious.

Good.

Ask God anyway.

Because the things we hold most tightly aren't always bad things.

Isaac wasn't bad.

Isaac was a blessing.

That's what makes this passage difficult.

Sometimes the hardest things to surrender are the good things we've begun believing we cannot live without.

14. HOLDING THE LINE

We've called this study:

HOLDING THE LINE.

But holding the line doesn't mean stubbornly holding onto everything.

Sometimes holding the line means letting something go.

Letting go of control.

Letting go of pride.

Letting go of resentment.

Letting go of a plan.
Letting go of an identity.
Letting go of something God is asking us to put down.
Because ultimately we're not holding the line for ourselves.
We're trying to remain faithful to Christ.
And Jesus never hid the cost.
He said:
"Take up his cross daily, and follow me."
That's the invitation.
Not comfort.
Not control.
Not certainty.
Follow Me.

DISCUSSION

1. Why is obedience easy when God's direction agrees with what we already want?
2. What happens inside us when God's direction conflicts with our plans?
3. Isaac was a good gift from God. How can good things become too important in our lives?
4. What blessing in your life would be hardest to place completely into God's hands?
5. Have you ever known what God required but tried to justify doing something different?
6. What has obedience cost you in the past?
7. Which is harder for you: surrendering control, comfort, money, reputation, relationships, plans, or pride? Why?
8. Can you honestly say:
"God is able—but if not, I will still obey Him"?
9. Where are you currently asking God to guarantee an outcome before you're willing to obey?
And finally:
What are you holding with a closed fist that God may be asking you to place in His hands?

SCRIPTURE TO CARRY THIS WEEK

1 Samuel 15:22

"To obey is better than sacrifice."

Luke 9:23

"Let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me."

Daniel 3:18

"But if not... we will not serve thy gods."

Three ideas:

Surrender.

Obey.

Follow.

Regardless of the cost.

WEEKLY CHALLENGE — OPEN YOUR HAND

Find somewhere quiet this week.

Sit down with a piece of paper.

Write this question:

WHAT AM I AFRAID GOD MAY ASK ME TO SURRENDER?

Don't answer quickly.

Sit with it.

Maybe it's something physical.

Maybe it's a relationship.

Maybe it's money.

Maybe it's a dream.

Maybe it's your pride.

Maybe it's your anger.

Maybe it's control.

Maybe it's simply the future you had planned.

Write it down.

Then hold your hand closed.

Make a fist.

Think about how much energy it takes to keep holding something tightly.

Then open your hand.

And pray:

“Father, everything I have come from You. I don't want Your gifts to become more important than You. Whatever I'm holding too tightly, teach me to place it in Your hands. I trust You with what happens next.”

You may have to pray that more than once.

That's okay.

Surrender isn't always a single moment.

Sometimes we open the same hand every morning.

CLOSING THOUGHT

Five sessions.

One journey.

When the strong man gets tired:

Let God restore you.

When you've been given a post:

Stand it.

When you're carrying something that belongs to God:

Put it down.

When God tells you to move:

Move.

And when obedience costs something:

Obey anyway.

Not because the road will always be easy.

Not because God guarantees the outcome you want.

Not because you'll always understand.

But because He is God.

Abraham walked up the mountain without knowing how the story would end.

Three men stood in front of a furnace without knowing whether God would deliver them.

The disciples followed Jesus without knowing where the road would eventually take them.

Faith doesn't require knowing the entire story.

It requires trusting the Author.

There will be days when you're exhausted.

There will be days when your post feels lonely.

There will be things you desperately want to control.

There will be moments when God tells you to move before you feel ready.

And eventually obedience will cost you something.

When those days come:

Remember who you belong to.

Remember who called you.

Remember who carries what you cannot.

And remember:

The goal isn't to live a life that costs you nothing.

The goal is to live a life that is faithful.

Hold the line.

CLOSING PRAYER

Father,

We've spent these weeks talking about strength, responsibility, rest, faith, and obedience.

Now help us live it.

When we're exhausted, teach us to come to You instead of hiding it.

When You've given us responsibility, make us faithful men who stand our post.

When we try to control things that belong in Your hands, remind us that You are God and we are not.

When You tell us to move, give us courage to take the next step even when we cannot see the entire road.

And when obedience costs us something, give us enough faith to obey anyway.

Father, show us what we're holding too tightly.
Our money.
Our plans.
Our reputation.
Our relationships.
Our pride.
Our comfort.
Our future.
Even the good things You've given us.
Don't allow the gift to become more important than the Giver.
Teach us to live with open hands.
Everything we have came from You.
Everything we are belongs to You.
We believe You are able.
But when Your answer isn't the one we wanted, give us the faith to say:
But if not, I will still follow You.
Make us men who don't simply talk about faith.
Make us faithful.
Make us obedient.
Make us willing to stand when standing is difficult.
And when our time here is finished, let it be said that we held the line You gave us to hold.
Not perfectly.
Not in our own strength.
But faithfully.
In Jesus' name, Amen.