

Understanding Love—Abraham, Isaac, and Art

Sometimes the call of love does not seem to make much sense, TO US. Yet, as we venture forward in trust of His loving character we find, in the end, that He knows what He is doing and we find that what He is doing is for our good and for the good of others. What appears at first to be a mockery of common sense turns out to be the brilliance of the Divine Strategist. Choices we make define our future. If you doubt this, just ask the man or woman who went against God's will for marriage. Ask them about their level of peace and harmony. As has been said before, more than any other decision we make, the choice of a spouse will largely determine whether our future on this earth is heaven or hell. Our choices tell us much about what we love, who we love, and how we love.

The intentional direction of the will toward God's best for us, even in the face of all the misguided emotions and passionate feelings which rage inside of us, will always result in our finding the life we were meant to live. To follow the emotions in defiance of biblical principles is to court destruction. To be leashed to feelings which are not in keeping with biblical character is to invite needless pain. We can trust God's good intentions for us because all of His intentions are grounded in His infinite and perfect love. To choose any course of action contrary to His leading is to open oneself up to momentous regret and a life separated from an experience of true love as defined by God.

The realities of this truth have been made apparent to me all of my life as I have watched many people close to me make decisions which led them beyond the boundaries of love. Likewise, I have watched in awe as many I have known walked in faith choosing God's way when everyone and everything else was telling them to take another path. Those individuals have experienced a depth of love and a quality of life beyond any worldly measure.

By God's grace, I have become aware of the insanity of life apart from His intentions. I still make bad decisions which haunt me, and I still find myself, like the apostle Paul, doing the bad I do not want to do, and I find myself unable to do the good which I ought to do. Hopefully, these moments of irrationality are getting fewer and further between as I grow in an understanding of the greatness of God. I call them moments of irrationality because, in the truest sense, choosing a course of action not in keeping with the ways of God just makes no sense. How is it that we lose sight of the fact that the One entity in existence that sees all, knows all, created all, and is above all, absolutely knows what the best course of action is for us, offers it to us, and provides for our best in what He offers? In the most literal of senses, to turn a deaf ear to His truth for our life is insanity. It is a decision to willingly embrace a lie. Anything in opposition to God's reality is in fact a lie.

So, if separating ourselves from His plans is, logically speaking, to live a lie then we must recognize that to live such a lie is to court emotional, relational, and spiritual chaos. Howard Hughes, despite his accomplishments, his billions, his sexual escapades and his courtship of power, in the end, found this to be true. Marilyn Monroe, despite her beauty, fame, desirability, and endless pleasure seeking, found the deadly reality of what life lived apart from God amounted to.

Every time I watch myself or someone I care about choose a way which seems good to the masses of misguided people out there, I am quickly reminded just how foolish those decisions turn out to be. We are all too guilty of uttering the regretful words, "If I knew then what I know now..." How different would the history of human civilization be had Adam and Eve not had to utter those words? How different would the history of the world be had not Abraham trusted God and acted on His promises?

Recently, I have been reminded of the sensibility of choosing God's direction over against the urging of the way of the road most traveled through my re-reading of the story of Abraham and Isaac and through my appreciation for art. Not too long ago, after acquiring some art I really liked, I spent a great deal of time pondering the significance of the art I had purchased. Art, good art, speaks of creativity, which speaks of an artistic creator, which speaks of purpose, and offers meaning. This particular work of art, actually five pieces, is centered round the theme of love. Four pieces are part of a suite, and the remaining piece is a large work which brings the various themes of the other four together in a powerful way. In the pages ahead my goal is to elaborate on the meaning of these works of art, and to point the way toward a proper understanding of the love of God as revealed in this art and in the story of Abraham and his son. The aim is to help us view God's love as it ought to be viewed by us and to make an attempt to help us both embrace and apply the love of God in our lives just as Abraham was able to do even amidst enormous challenges.

My premise is that just as Abraham's faith and life was secured by his knowledge of and relationship with the loving God of scripture, so too, our lives find their bearings in, and only in, our dependence upon the love of God. The extent of our dependence is made manifest in our way of living. It affects how we talk, how we relate to others, how we present ourselves, how we respond to adversity, those we choose to walk with, how we do business, how we do romance and marriage, how we parent, and all that we are and do. At the end of the day, my hope is that each of us will be renewed in our thirst for a God-like love and a God-secured faith in His plans for us. Also, my passion is to demonstrate the futility of choosing a path and a pattern of life that is in opposition to God's intentions for us. At a minimum, it is a scandalous breach of reason to turn ones' back on the artistic vision of God for our lives. In choosing Him we embrace a world of opportunity so grand that the mind cannot begin to comprehend it.

Love Defined

At the outset, I would like us to consider four major questions which help bring the significance of this issue to the forefront of our minds. These questions require us to wrestle with who we are, what we desire, and what we should expect in our lives as a result of our answers. As you continue to read you will be reminded of the significance of the questions and just how critical the answers are to the unfolding of your life. In answering these questions honestly you may actually answer many questions you have had in your mind for many years. Questions like, "Why am I where I am today?", "Why did this relationship fall apart?", "How did I get in this predicament?", "What could I have done differently?", "Where do I go from here?", and many others could very well find their answers in the answers to the big four I now put before you. Here they are:

1. What do you love?
2. Who do you love?
3. How do you love?
4. Why do you love?

I realize the questions seem somewhat simple and anticlimactic. However, if you ponder them on the deepest of levels, profound realities surface very quickly. We will come back to these in the pages ahead.

As we now turn to a discussion of what the love of God looks like and how it unfolds in our lives and in our hearts, we begin, simply, by looking at a few definitions of love. First, we are told in scripture that “God is love”. That’s where it all begins. Yet, scripture does not leave it there. If love truly is a reality, and if God is love, then that love must encompass certain qualities. This seems easy enough to understand. The scriptures also tell us, in reference to Jesus, “He who has seen Him has seen the Father”. That is to say, if you look upon the person of Jesus as revealed in scripture, you see God—you see love in its purest form. So, if one desire’s a comprehensive view of love in action, one needs only to read the gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John). To turn down Jesus is to turn down God, to reject God is to spurn love, and to spurn love, as defined by God and in the person of Jesus, is to embrace a false life. To embrace a false life, friends, is to choose a path filled with less than favorable realities. To embrace a loveless, and therefore a Godless life, is to choose a life apart from God, it is to believe a lie, and it is a willful living in the lie. Essentially, that lie amounts to nothing more than one’s attempt to define life and love on one’s own terms. That has not, will not, and cannot work, ever.

And now, one more definition of love before we turn to Abraham, Isaac, and art. As you read this passage, keep the questions above in mind (the big four). I Corinthians 13 (the “love chapter”) presents us with a very descriptive vision of Godly love. This is the goal for all human activity, personality, and practice. This is what we should aim for, thirst for, and pursue with an all out desire. The passage reads,

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends.

*So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.
(I Cor 13:1-7,13)*

A Supreme Love

With the definition of love in place, our focus must now turn toward the outworking of love in real life. Does such love exist? Is it possible for us to love and be loved in any way remotely reflecting the definitions of love just given? In a world where love seems fleeting at best, it is tough to believe that we can experience something so supreme and inspiring. Jack Johnson, in one of his great tunes asks the question, “Where have all the good people gone?” In the song Jack reflects on the reality that “goodness” cannot be found easily in this world, and certainly not on the “boob tube”. Certainly, our experience demonstrates that too few “good” people can be found.

The television and the silver screen, most certainly, do not offer an adequate portrayal of goodness and love as defined by God. Like Isaiah discovered in his vision of God, Jack sings, perhaps unknowingly, of a reality that we are all too familiar with; the loss of a knowledge of God results in a loss of goodness which in turn results in the loss of love. Consequently, in our society the loss of goodness and love has brought an epidemic of hopelessness. In any relationship in which we abandon and run from the love of God we find that in pushing Him away we push love away. All of our relational disasters, in the final analysis, are brought upon us by a refusal, of at least one party in the relationship, to embrace the ethic of divine love. Living through hurt after hurt, we find hope diminishing.

These realities being so, where do we begin in our quest to know, demonstrate, and experience such love? If we are to have any hope, I submit that our starting point must be beyond ourselves. Indeed, if we are to have an internal resource for love it must come from something, someone “bigger” than ourselves. This someone, God Himself, can impart to us an inner experience of His love so captivating that it gives rise to a newly created set of desires, beliefs, and passions which in turn make us capable of outward expressions which begin to resemble the kind of love described in I Corinthians 13. If you doubt this can happen, take another look at the story of Abraham and Isaac.

The Promise of Love—Abraham and Isaac

Genesis 22, the story of Abraham and his son Isaac, offers the reader a picture of what it means to be secured by the love of God. At first glance, perhaps, this theme of divine love is not readily apparent in the unfolding of this episode. After all, here we find a man called by God to pursue a course that not only seems contrary so our understanding of sane living, but in some sense, seems cruel. Where is the love of God in this picture? We will get to that.

In the dining room of our home are four pieces of artwork which I call “The Love Suite”. I intentionally placed these pieces of art there because I want to be reminded regularly of the quest for love and all of its implications. Aside from doing dinners with family and friends in that room I also write and work there quite a bit. As I sit and think, write, and work, I am forced to consider the profound truths which arise from the art that surrounds me.

The first piece of art I notice as I take my place at the end of the table is a representation of a typical experience of human love. This work regularly gets a good deal of attention and comment when others are in the room because it captures a reality

that all of us have experienced. The painting portrays a person, a thoughtful person, reflecting upon various experiences in life where the loss of love has wounded the soul. The individual personified in the painting, (which is executed in hues of dark reds, golds, and browns) somewhat “cartoonish”, could be male or female, young or old, and is pictured as a “monkish” figure (robed, with hood on, face indistinguishable, and always in a thoughtful posture) sitting upon various precipices, each of which look like tall rock formations which rise from untold depths. Each structure is reminiscent of a nail in that each descends from a flat and rounded nail head-like top down to a narrowing “beginning” point which cannot be seen. Upon each structure or “experience” sits this person pondering each event with a large heart just behind like a shadow. Somewhere, distant, and in the background, the sun attempts to break through and offer hope.

The emotional response one has in looking at the painting is tangible. Each time I look at it I am reminded of the “moments” in my life when loveless acts (my own or those brought into my life by others) resulted in deep pain. Upon one structure I can, with my inner eye, see that moment in which deception drove its way through my heart like a nail being driven through the flesh. Upon another structure I recall the injuries I caused another by my carelessness and insensitivity. Upon yet another structure I view, again, in Technicolor, the moment in which I was misunderstood and mistreated by someone I cared for. Other structures remind me of the pain inflicted by the “church”. Still others bring back hurts I thought were totally healed. Moral failures, emotional baggage, spiritual hang-ups, broken relationships, hopes crushed, wishes denied, quests gone awry, loves unrequited, ...they all come to mind.

If you could view this painting yourself I believe you would find yourself there as well. Some might remember the moment when sexual abuse so wounded them that their souls and psyche were changed forever. Others might remember the blows, one after another, that were inflicted upon them when a spouse or a parent went mad and used physical superiority to “control” them. Others, betrayed by a lover, will recall the very moment when the truth was revealed and all was found out, leaving them and the family in a heap of twisted debris. Others will see themselves upon these precipices of pain in those moments when they made tragic decisions that resulted in addictions, disease, heartbreak, and relational turmoil. Still others may view each precipice as just another of those attempts to find healing in all the wrong places, people, and pursuits.

Wherever and however you have been hurt by “love” in this life, one thing holds true, the memories linger. The bright side of this story, however, is that the moments of goodness remain as well. What you cannot help but understand as you look at this picture in my dining room is that light yet remains. Goodness is always seeking to break through. There is light at the end of the tunnel, as they say. The light, we must be reminded, comes from a distant shore, and is capable of renewing the heart even amidst the most devastating of circumstances. The purity of this light is the only thing which can illuminate a viable hope and it is the road to healing and restoration. It is this truth which established Abraham’s faith and enabled him to see past the pain of his heart and trust God for the future. In the most horrific of life events, the ensuing death of his own son, at his own hand, Abraham was able to look beyond the pain and confusion, and toward the light of God’s promise. Even as all appeared to be lost (his reputation, his son, his future, and the future of an entire nation) Abraham chose the path of faith and found a loving God of provision capable of working all things for good.

Abraham, called to take his son on an apparent life ending journey, obediently walked toward a place God had designated as Abraham's greatest test. What God had called Abraham to do was seemingly unthinkable. Not only was he being asked to sacrifice his own son upon an altar, but also, in that very act, Abraham was being called, at least in his own eyes, to bring an end to the promise of God for his future and the future of an entire people. Isaac was the one through whom the entire deal would unfold. What do we do when nothing seems to make any sense? Abraham's life answers, "Trust the loving character of God."

How is the person of faith to process walking through challenges of such enormity? How can any such pain bring about a good result? The emotional and psychological torture that Abraham must have gone through should be obvious. The insecurity he must have dealt with as he pondered what others would think and say about him must have been beyond description. What would his friends say of his "faith act"? What would his family say? What would the community say? Abraham was forced to consider the pain of a future far different from anything he had ever anticipated. Where was God in all of this? He must have had this thought a million times. As he made the journey toward "the place" (Moriah) where all the tragedy would unfold, he must have been emotionally, physically, and spiritually spent. All of life would be different when he left this place. And so it was!

What we discover in this episode of soul trauma is that this man, in the plan of God, comes to find that the journey was not to a place, but rather to a person. Yes, there were geographic, physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual landmarks along the way, but the pilgrimage was always headed directly toward God. The culmination of this test of faith, and certainly a test of love for Abraham, revealed that behind it all stood the love of God committed to Abraham's good. In fact, despite the struggle that must have been there internally for him, Abraham's obedience arose from his security in the love of God. Abraham knew, through experience, the love of God could always be trusted. He had seen time and time again, that God's love was always on time, always in place, and always perfect. Abraham recognized that whatever lay ahead, God's love would secure his heart and his future. What he found, in the end, was exactly that. Though he had presumed that things would unfold in tragic ways, God had another plan. What appeared, at first glance, to be a total loss to Abraham, was in fact, in God's workings, a new day of faith and love for Abraham, his family and his nation. God provided "another" sacrifice, spared his son, and won the day! He still does that today.

Like the test of Abraham, our tests in life are ultimately not about events, episodes, and places. The testing of our heart, even the breaking of our heart, is about our being brought to a place of total dependence upon the only One in existence who will never fail or hurt us. People are fickle. Life can seem futile. The love of God is neither.

The great reality of Abraham's life is that he had been prepared for this test in the years prior to this calling. In experiencing the love of God over and over again, Abraham knew that God would not ultimately fail, regardless of how foreboding things looked. He could trust God would be true to His character and to His plan for His people. Abraham, in the greatest test of his life, was able to surrender all of his pain, fears, and insecurities to the only one who could handle them. When he was most vulnerable to ridicule, defeat, emotional breakdown, and complete failure, Abraham steadfastly moved in the direction of love, the love of God, and this secured him in the deepest sense. In moving toward

that place of pain and loss, Abraham found a Person. In this person he found healing, hope, provision, and a future. He was a better man having endured the episode with faith and trust in His creator. To have chosen another path would have reduced him to a common man, a man of the masses, a lesser man.

C.S. Lewis describes his reluctant conversion as one in which he was being brought to God “kicking and screaming”. Being surprised by joy, through great pain, what he came to find was a person of matchless love. Like many of us, Lewis thought life was about arriving at a certain “place” through one’s experiences, education, and accomplishments. What he ultimately found, however, is what we all must find if we are to know healing and divine love. We are not on a journey to a “place” in life. No “place” of emotional maturity, or success, or sense of “self discovery” will satisfy the hungers and hurts of the heart. We all crave relationships, a desire to love and to be loved. It is in our DNA. We must submit to the reality that this hunger was planted within us by God, and as St. Augustine has reminded us, our hearts will not rest until they find their rest in God. Our hurts are meant to drive us toward that Person, who alone, can provide what we need. In finding this One, we find the ability to live by faith, hope for a future, and extend and receive love to and from others. As C.S. Lewis has written, “I thought I was coming to a place, I did not know I was coming to a person.”

So, I ask you today, “Where are you?” That is the question that addresses the circumstances in your life. It is the question that is merely a precursor to the question that really matters. “Whose are you?” Notice, I did not ask who you are. In reality *who* you are is defined by *whose* you are. If you consider, unlike Abraham, your life to be your own then what you get from life will be what YOU construct. Any of us, if we are honest, will quickly recognize that in and of ourselves we are capable of really screwing things up. No amount of success, money, power, recognition, or any prize in this life can cover what is really going on inside of us on the deepest of levels. There are primary questions and primary answers which must be dealt with if we are to find peace in this life.

Abraham took the path that too few of us are willing to take. Instead of closing his life off to the Creator, he opened his journey to the One who would become for him his compass. Either life would be about knowing, experiencing and sharing the love of God, or it would not be a life worth living for Abraham. The defining question of his life was answered in his most intense episode of pain. Amidst the pressures of society, friends, family, and a nation, Abraham considered his pursuit of the love of God of immeasurable worth. No course of action was worth pursuing, no measure of ease was worth embracing, and no worldly standard of measurement made sense to him in light of the brilliance of divine love. Nothing, no one, no way, now how could he be stopped from moving toward the love of a lifetime.

Making it Practical

How have you fared to this point? How have the hurts come? Where are your darkest moments? Have you been taken for a fool? Has the love you offered been “returned to sender”? Where do you go from here?

The truth is that the pain in our life does not have to ruin us. I can tell you from experience that God is able to redeem even the darkest and most senseless of moments.

As a product of a broken home, as one who has seen many dreams dashed, as one who has sat beside many a bed watching loved ones die, and as a single father of three who knows the pain of divorce, I can tell you that the love of God is big enough to sustain, grow, embolden, renew, and inspire the most desperate of hearts.

If you have never know the kind of love which sustained and empowered Abraham and if you have never experienced the kind of love described in I Corinthians 13, you need only give God a chance to demonstrate the reality of this kind of love. You will not find that kind of love in a bar room, a board room or a secret bedroom. You won't find it in Hollywood. You won't hear most of your "friends" describe it. And you will never experience it apart from a knowledge of God. His offer is made to every hurting heart. His light is always seeking a heart that will open up to Him. He longs to redeem what you have given away or what has been taken from you. He wants to teach you how to receive love from others, and He wants to enable you to love as you have never loved before.

Consider, for a moment, how sad the story would be had not Abraham taken God at His word and walked toward the plan God had for him. What if he would have turned his back on the gift God was offering? The path was not clear to Abraham, and the road had many challenging turns, yet, it was full of promise, fulfillment, and wonder. The message of God, even amidst the overwhelming sense of doubt, was clear, "The best is yet to come, Abraham. Just trust me. Do this my way. You will never figure it out. This is mine to accomplish." Are you listening? The same message comes to you.

Had Abraham turned from God's call and operated in his own methodology or chosen the way of the masses, he would never have known just how thrilling life could be while walking in God's plan. He would have settled down to a life of emotional instability, worldly choices, and roller coaster experiences divorced from the settled reality that God was in control. Again, it is still true today. You can continue to live a life built on your own capacity to master the universe, and never understand why "bad things happen to good people", or you can choose the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and thereby, find a way to measure a life worth living. If your desire is to find the life you were meant to live, the choice is more than a bit clear. As the scriptures encourage, "Choose this day whom you will serve...as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

In making the choice to embrace and walk in the love of God you will find that you have been changed. You will have new abilities to love. You will find new strength to navigate difficulty. You will become a better lover, friend, employee, counselor, mentor, role model, parent, ...In coming to a Person, the person of God, as revealed in Jesus, you will find that despite how things have been, and how they may look now, as you walk toward His purposes the light will break through and you will know that you have tasted and seen that He is good. He is able to heal your heart; He is able to offer you a hope and a future. He can instill within you new desires, good desires.

Look at the challenges, hurts, doubts, and confusion for what they are, assess your part in the carnage, recognize what you could and could not have controlled or done differently, learn from it all, and then turn your gaze resolutely toward God and say with Abraham, "Here am I. Do with me what you know to be best. I embrace your future, your way."

Grace and Peace,
Bruce Smith

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