

Lesson 7

- The bible is convincing
- God gives a son to Abraham
- The Son of God took our punishment

Lesson 7a

The bible is convincing

The bible is the Word of God. It does not contain stories of human imagination, but the truth. Many people wonder how anyone can be sure of that. Is there a proof? The answer is no, there is no proof. A believer does not have a proof, but he knows that the bible is the Word of God. He has been convinced of the truth.

People ask for proof

The first people who heard the gospel of Jesus Christ had difficulty with what they heard. They listened with suspicion to the good news. Did they need to be saved through someone who had died and then risen again? It seemed impossible. They would be regarded as fools if they would just accept this strange story as truth. Before believing they wanted proof from the ones who brought the message. They did not get a proof. God's plan of salvation cannot be explained with human wisdom.

1 Corinthians 1:
18-20

'For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has God not made foolish the wisdom of the world?'

People like to hear a solid proof before they believe in something. This is especially true for people in this age of technology and science that we live in. Many people have a great trust in science. However, the truth of the bible does not let itself be explained by science.

No one can prove it

It is not possible to prove the bible scientifically. Is it possible for one person to convince another that the bible is the Word

of God? Some people think it is. For Roman Catholic people for example the bible is God's Word because the church says so and to them the authority of the church is beyond doubt. Others try to find proof by doing archaeological searches at places mentioned in the bible. For example, on the mountain Ararat they hope to find remains of Noah's arc. With what they find they hope to convince other people of the truth of the bible.

In both cases the so-called proof is based on the arguments or findings of men. However, what man says does not have divine authority. No one can convince anyone else that the bible is the Word of God. However strong his arguments may seem.

The bible convinces people

- The power to convince

Through the ages people have been convinced through the words of the bible. We find a good example in Luke 24. Two men are on their way from Jerusalem to their town of Emmaus. On the road they discuss the events of the past three days. They talk about the death penalty that Jesus received and everything that happened after that. They are very confused because they heard that morning that Jesus disappeared from his grave and is said to have risen from the dead. That very moment, Jesus joins them on their way. Because of their confusion, they do not recognise Him. Jesus asks them what they are talking about. From their answer it is clear that they had not understood a thing of the purpose of Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus goes on to explain to them why it had to happen. He does not do so by pointing at himself but by explaining the Old Testament to them.

Luke 24:25-27

'How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory? And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, He explained to them what was said in all the scriptures concerning himself'

While Jesus is speaking to the men, they become convinced by his words. They start to see and understand the purpose of Jesus' life on earth. Only after that, their eyes are opened and they recognise Jesus. The order is not first to see, understand and then to believe, but first to believe and then to see and understand as well.

In the same way Jesus convinces all his followers. He uses the bible's power to convince. Later, his disciples follow this example. Their audience is convinced through their explanation of the bible. Paul for example says:

1 Corinthians 2:4-5 *'My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power'*

- We need to let ourselves be convinced
The Word of God is not just another message. It is a power that can convince people. Something happens to us when we read the bible. The bible shows us who we are and that is a powerful message. However, the same Word also brings us salvation. This means we cannot ignore the message of the bible. We can either let ourselves be convinced and won over, or we have to resist the message. There is no other option.

- We become convinced of the truth
When we let ourselves be convinced, we will be more and more overwhelmed with the truth of the bible. We come to see how God always sticks to his Word and how the Word does its work in us. We become certain about the eternal value and truth of God's Word.

Psalms 119:89-90 *'Your word, O LORD, is eternal;
It stands firm in the heavens.
Your faithfulness continues through all generations'*

1 Thessalonians
2:13

Receive and accept

The truth of the bible cannot be proved. The bible is a gift from God. God only tells the truth. For that reason we need to receive and accept the bible. We do not need to ask for a certificate of truth. When we read the bible unconditionally as the Word of God and not the word of man, it will start working in our hearts.

'And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe'

Questions

1. What does Paul say in 1 Corinthians 2:4,5 about the bible's power to convince?
2. In this lesson asking for proof has been opposed to the bible's power to convince. The verb 'to see' is related to proofs. Which verb is related to the power to convince?
3. What happens to someone who lets himself be convinced of the Word of God?

God gives a son to Abraham

Lesson 7b

God gives a son to Abraham

Abraham and Sarah have had to wait for a long time for the son of God's promise. Eventually, their patience is rewarded. A year after God came to visit Abraham, Isaac is born.

The birth of Isaac

Read: Genesis 21:1-7

21:3 *Isaac*: he laughs

This passage clearly shows that it is God who makes it possible for Sarah to give birth to son. She is too old to get pregnant. From a medical point of view it is impossible for the promised son to come. It can only be God's doing.

This is the beginning of the nation that Abraham was to bring forth. It seemed impossible but God can make the impossible real.

Hagar and Ishmael

Read: Genesis 21:8-21

21:8 *to wean*: to stop breastfeeding

21:17 *the angel of God*: In the Old Testament God sometimes appeared in the form of an angel. This angel, who is God, is called 'the angel of God' or 'the angel of the LORD'.

In eastern cultures women would breastfeed their children until they were about three years old. It would be a special occasion when this was stopped.

When Sarah stops breastfeeding Isaac, Abraham makes it a big celebration. Sarah's maidservant Hagar and her son Ishmael are there. Ishmael is about seventeen now and he does not like the little Isaac who is so much more important than him. He scorns his half brother and laughs at him. When Sarah sees what happens, she intervenes. She tells Abraham

to send Hagar and Ishmael away. She does not want Isaac to share the inheritance with the son of her maidservant.

Sarah is not being very kind and besides, she acts against the custom of her time. When a man has a child with one of the maidservants, he is not supposed to abandon it. It is therefore understandable that Abraham is not happy doing what she says. Ishmael is his son and he loves him. How can he send him and Hagar away? However, God tells him to do what Sarah says because only Isaac's children will be regarded as Abraham's offspring.

There is no question of Ishmael and Isaac sharing the inheritance. God's promises are only meant for Isaac. He is the son that God gave to Abraham and Sarah. He will inherit the land of Canaan and from him the promised nation will descend that will live in Canaan.

Ishmael, the son that Abraham organised for himself, has no right to claim this inheritance. Nevertheless, because he is a son of Abraham God will also make him into a nation. God does not forget Ishmael, but neither can he stay with Abraham and his family. Abraham has to send him and his mother away.

However difficult it may be for Abraham, he obeys God. The next morning he sends Hagar and Ishmael away, giving them bread and water for the road.

Hagar and Ishmael face a rough journey. They end up in a desert where Ishmael almost dies of thirst. When Hagar is desperate God helps her out. He shows her a well that she had not seen yet through all her trouble. Ishmael is saved and God promises Hagar that He will make Ishmael into a great nation.

God watches over Ishmael as he grows up. He lives in the Padan desert and becomes a talented archer. He becomes the father of the Arab peoples.

Abraham's faith tested

Read: Genesis 22:1-19

22:1 *Here I am:* Yes, I am listening

22:11 *the angel of the LORD:* see explanation for Genesis 21:17

22:12 *to fear God:* to have respect for God

After many years of waiting, God has given Abraham a son. God wants to test whether Abraham remembers that the son was a gift from God and that he still belongs to God and not to Abraham. Can Abraham return his son to God after having waited all his life?

God knows He is asking much from Abraham. We can tell from the words He uses:

Genesis 22:2

'Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering...'

The bible does not tell us how Abraham feels. We only get to see what he does. He does not argue with God or ask for a delay. He immediately does what God asks from him, even the next morning.

It takes Abraham and Isaac three days to get to the place of the sacrifice. Two servants accompany them. They do not know what Abraham is going to do and neither does Isaac. For the last part of the journey Isaac is even carrying on his shoulders the wood on which he will be burned.

Those days must have been the hardest of Abraham's life. But however difficult he finds it, he continues to trust God. We can tell this from what he says to his servants as they approach the place where he is to bring the sacrifice:

Genesis 22:5

'Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you'

Genesis 22:8

Again we can tell that he trusts God when Isaac asks him where the lamb is that they are going to sacrifice. Abraham answers him:

'God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son'

The New Testament tells us how it is possible that Abraham can say these things. He believes in God and has a complete trust in Him. Even though he knows that Isaac is going to be the father of the nation of God's promise, he wants to do what God asks from him. He is convinced that even if Isaac is killed, it will not be the end. God has the power to raise Isaac from the dead.

When God spoke to him, Abraham left his country and his family behind. He is now even ready to give up his son, the son that was to bring forth the promised nation.

When God sees this, when He sees that Abraham trusts Him to this extent and loves Him so much, that he is willing to give Him what is dearest to his heart, He calls him to a halt. God gives Abraham his son back and He does what Abraham had already told Isaac: He provides a ram for Abraham to sacrifice. Then God takes an oath. He swears to reward Abraham for his faith and obedience. Abraham's descendants will be numerous and one day all the peoples on earth will share in the blessings that God has promised.

God stopped Abraham from sacrificing his son. Centuries later, God himself did what Abraham did not have to do. He sacrificed his Son. As a lamb, He was sacrificed for the sins of the people. This sacrifice was necessary to restore the relationship between God and man. Through Jesus' sacrifice all people can share in God's promise to Abraham that when they trust in the Son of God, they will belong to God's people and God will bless them.

God gives a son to Abraham

Sarah dies

God kept his promise: He gave a son to Abraham and Sarah. He has made a start with the nation that He promised. However, Canaan still does not belong to Abraham. When Sarah dies, this becomes a painful reality. Abraham has to buy a plot of land to be able to bury her. The first piece of land Abraham possesses in Canaan is a grave.

A wife for Isaac

Abraham has a lonely position in Canaan. Except perhaps for a few people, everyone worships idols rather than the living God. According to the custom of his time, he will need to find a wife for Isaac. He does not want him to marry a girl from Canaan. He wants him to marry a girl who believes in God. For that reason, Abraham sends his eldest servant, the one he trusts most, to Haran. It is the city where he and Sarah were from and where their relatives still live. He expects there might be a girl amongst his relatives who worships God.

The servant leaves for Mesopotamia with ten camels and large collection of precious gifts. He is heading for Haran. After a long journey, he reaches that city and stops at the well to give his camels a drink of water. It is the late afternoon, the time when women usually come to get water from the well. The servant prays to God: 'Lord, God of Abraham, let me succeed today. The women will come to get water. I will ask one of them to give me a drink and if she then offers to give water to all the camels as well, let it be the girl you have in mind for Isaac'. The behaviour of the girl will show that she is quick to help and friendly.

When he has only just finished praying, a girl comes to the well with a water jar on her shoulder. When the servant asks her for a drink of water, she not only gives him a drink but moreover she gives water to his camels. Now the servant knows that this is the girl God has meant for Isaac. The girl, Rebekah, turns out to be a granddaughter of Abraham's brother Nahor. When the servant hears this, he thanks God who has guided him directly to this woman.

The servant tells Rebekah's family about his master Abraham and about his mission for this journey. He asks the family if he can take Rebekah with him to Canaan because God has pointed her out as Isaac's wife. The girl's father and her brother answer: 'This is God's decision which we cannot oppose. Take Rebekah and let her become your master's wife'. The servant thanks God for this answer.

The next morning Abraham's servant wants to leave for Canaan with Rebekah, although her family would like her to stay for ten more days. However, the servant is determined to leave immediately. Now that God has made him succeed he does not want to be delayed. The family tells Rebekah to decide whether she wants to go immediately or in ten days time. She chooses to go immediately. Apparently, she cannot wait to meet her husband.

Isaac marries Rebekah and he loves her.

God gives twins

Read: Genesis 25:19-26

Like Sarah before her, Rebekah cannot have children. When Isaac and Rebekah have been married for twenty years they still have no children. Nevertheless, Isaac prays for her. He asks if God will give Rebekah a child. He knows God can make a barren woman fertile. He is the living proof! God answers Isaac's prayer. Soon Rebekah expects twins. God continues the line to the nation that He once promised to Abraham.

During her pregnancy Rebekah notices something strange. It seems as if the children she expects are fighting inside her. They jostle each other and it seems as if they want to get rid of one another. When she asks God what is happening, He answers:

Genesis 25:23

*'Two nations are in your womb,
And two peoples from within you will be separated;
One people will be stronger than the other,
And the older will serve the younger'*

God calls the two unborn babies 'nations'. God has a plan for the children Rebekah is expecting. Both will become the father of a nation and something unusual for that time will happen, the youngest son will be the most powerful. The nation that will descend from the eldest son will serve the nation that will be descended from the youngest son.

Rebekah's eldest son, Esau, becomes the father of the Edomites. Jacob, the youngest, becomes the father of the Israelites. From the Old Testament we know that the people of Edom have indeed been servants to the Israelites.

The twins are born. The boy who is born first, Esau, is red and very hairy. The younger brother is holding on to the older brother's heel, when he is born. It is as if the younger brother Jacob wants to be first from the very moment of his birth.

Questions

1. Make a timetable showing:

- Abram's age when God tells him to leave his country and when He promises him a son (Genesis 12:1-4).
- Abram's age when Ishmael is born (Genesis 16:1-3 and 17:24-25).
- Abraham's age when God calls him Abraham and tells him to circumcise everyone who belongs to the covenant (Genesis 17:1-5).
- Abraham's age when Isaac is born (Genesis 21:5).
- Abraham's age when Sarah dies (Genesis 17:17 and 23:1).
- Abraham's age when Isaac marries Rebekah (Genesis 25:20).

- Abraham's age when his grandson's are born (Genesis 25:26).
 - Abraham's age when he dies (Genesis 25:7).
2. In Old Testament times there were many nations where the sacrifice of a child was common practice. Babies and young children would be killed to please the gods.
- a. How does God think about this practice? Look at Deuteronomy 12:29-31 and 18:9-10a. Deuteronomy 12 is addressed to the Israelites who are about to enter the land of Canaan.
 - b. Why do you think God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son?
 - c. How is it possible that Abraham was willing to obey God to this extent?
3. Abraham wanted to avoid two things when Isaac had become an adult.
- a. What two things are they? Look at Genesis 24:1-9, 24:2 *put your hand under my thigh: a way of taking an oath in those days*, 24:7 *He will send an angel before you: to help him*.
 - b. Why do you think Abraham wants to avoid these things?

The son of God took our punishment

Lesson 7c

The Son of God took our punishment

In this lesson we will discuss the fourth article of the Apostolic Creed: 'I believe in Jesus Christ who... suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell'. In other words, we will discuss the punishment that the Son of God had to suffer for our salvation.

Jesus came to suffer

Today, some people think that Jesus' life ended in a disaster. He died at a young age, before He was able to fulfil his ideals. He had no chance to achieve his aims.

However, the bible is very clear about the fact that Jesus' suffering and death were not a disaster. It was not bad luck that Jesus ended up in court and was sentenced to death. It was God's plan. The Son of God became man to suffer and die.

Jesus knew what was going to happen to Him. Nevertheless, He did not regard it as his fate, as something that came in between Him and his purpose in life. He regarded the suffering and death as a mission that He needed to fulfil. We know this from some of the things He said. He for example told his followers that He had come to earth to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many people.

The term 'ransom' comes from the Old Testament. In the book of Exodus it says that someone who had deserved death penalty for a certain act could buy off the punishment with a ransom, a certain amount of money.

Jesus explained to his followers that He had to give up his life as a ransom for other people. Through his death, they would be able to go free.

In the Old Testament God had already announced the sacrifice that Jesus would bring, both through the sacrificial rituals and through the prophets. We will first consider what the sacrificial

service symbolised and then what the prophet Isaiah said about the death of Jesus.

The sacrifice of animals announced the sacrifice of Jesus

God had told the Israelites what to do when they had done something wrong. If anyone had sinned they would have to bring a sin offering. He would have to take a clean* animal, for example a lamb, and have it killed and sacrificed on an altar. In that way the person admitted to God that he was guilty and deserving of punishment and that the animal was killed instead of him.

God had promised the Israelites that He would be satisfied with the death of an animal. He promised that He would remove the guilt of the person who brought the sacrifice. After the sacrifice the relationship between God and the sinner would be restored.

In Old Testament times animals would be sacrificed daily for the sins of the people. Through the ages hundreds of thousands of animals must have been killed.

The fact that animals were killed over and over again showed the Israelites that animals could ultimately not restore the relationship between God and man. The endless stream of animal blood that flowed showed that there had to be a different solution: an ultimate solution.

Jesus Christ was that solution: the sacrificial lamb provided by God to take away the sin of the world. All the sin and guilt of the world was to be laid on Him and with his death they would disappear forever.

The sacrifices of animals were no more than signs. Every animal that was killed and sacrificed pointed to Jesus Christ who was to be the ultimate sacrifice. After his death no more animals needed to be killed.

Isaiah announced the sacrifice of Jesus

Besides the sacrificial rites, God used prophets to announce the coming of the Saviour. Especially the prophet Isaiah has

been able to tell a lot about what Jesus would come to do seven centuries later.

Isaiah never uses the name Jesus. Rather, he speaks of 'the servant of the LORD'. However, from the rest of the bible we know that he means Jesus. One example of what he says about Jesus is:

Isaiah 53:3-10

*'He was despised and rejected by men,
A man of sorrows and familiar with suffering.
Like one from whom men hide their faces
He was despised, and we esteemed him not.*

...

*But he was pierced for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities;
The punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
And by his wounds we are healed.*

*We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to his own way;
And the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.
He was oppressed and afflicted,
Yet he did not open his mouth.
He was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
And as a sheep before her shearers is silent,
So he did not open his mouth.*

...

*And though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering,
He will see his offspring and prolong his days,
And the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand'*

From Isaiah's words we can conclude a number of things about the servant of the LORD, about Jesus Christ, the Son of God:

- He would have to suffer a lot and be despised by everyone.

- He would not suffer for his own disobedience but for that of others.
- Through his suffering other people would have peace with God.
- He would suffer because God wanted Him to.
- His suffering would be voluntarily at the same time: He would offer himself as a sacrifice for sin.

Jesus suffered

The Apostolic Creed does not tell anything about Jesus' life. It tells us He was born from the virgin Mary and then it goes on to tell about his suffering and death, as if nothing happened in between; as if he had not lived and worked in Israel for many long years.

The Creed goes straight on from Jesus' birth to his death because it is meant to be a summary of what the bible teaches us about God and therefore it only mentions the most important aspects of Jesus' work. Besides, you could say that Jesus' life has been one long time of suffering.

Jesus' suffering starts at his birth. The Son of God is born in a manger. A crib has to serve as his cot. Before He is even a year old, the king is already after his life. Joseph and Mary have to flee from the country with Him.

Once Jesus has grown up He starts on his special mission. Throughout Israel He is to tell the people that the Kingdom of God is about to come. He has to urge people to return to God. In that time, Jesus has to go through a lot of suffering. Satan tries in numerous ways to persuade Him to turn his back on God. The religious leaders of his day do not acknowledge Him as the Son of God. On the contrary, they regard Him as being on Satan's side. They oppose Him in everything and try to kill Him.

Most of the people only want to see the miracles that He performs, but they will not believe that He is the promised Saviour.

The son of God took our punishment

Towards the end of his life, his suffering increases. One of his followers, who has been with Him for three years, betrays Him and turns Him in to the religious leaders who arrest Him. During his trial numerous people accuse Him wrongly. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor who rules over Israel in that time, has to admit that Jesus is totally innocent after he has talked to Him. Despite this he gives permission for Jesus to be killed. And so, after having been beaten, insulted and flogged by Pilate's soldiers, Jesus is brought to the place of execution. There He dies in the most cruel, painful and slow way: He is crucified.

Jesus suffered a lot. It was not less serious for Him because He was the Son of God. Just like any other person, He was terrified of pain and suffering and death. We know from the bible that Jesus, just before He was arrested, was overcome with fear to such an extent that He was sweating blood. He begged his Father not to have to go through with it. But He added: *'Not my will, but yours be done'*. Before everything He wanted to be obedient to God.

Jesus was crucified

Crucifixion was a punishment the Romans used for slaves and criminals. The convict would first be flogged with a leather whip with little pieces of metal on its ends and after the flogging he would be nailed with his hands and his feet to a wooden cross. After the cross had been erected the convict would be hanging between heaven and earth. While he was waiting to die he would suffer immense pain and thirst and a lack of breath. It could take days for the convict to die.

Jesus had to undergo this terrible punishment. However, He was not the only one to receive this punishment. The Romans did it to numerous people and in the course of history people have suffered worse deaths than this one. So what makes Jesus' suffering different from that of others?

The bible says that the punishment that Jesus underwent was the severest punishment ever. The crucifixion was only part of

it. What made the punishment so severe was invisible to the outer world: it was God's anger. Jesus, who had never committed any sin, took on Him God's anger over all the sins of mankind. God, his Father, turned his back on Him and made Him suffer the complete punishment for all of mankind.

As a sign of the fact that Jesus was abandoned by his Father, the world was covered in darkness for three whole hours in the middle of the day. During those three hours Jesus went in full consciousness, through eternal death – complete separation from God. God did not want to have anything to do with Him. In those hours God piled on Him all that man has ever done wrong. He gave his Son the full punishment. We cannot begin to imagine the severity of that punishment.

The Creed tries to put it into words by saying he descended into hell. On the cross, Jesus was in Satan's domain, in hell. He underwent the pain and fear and loneliness of hell. He had to undergo the attacks of Satan.

We do not know how Jesus felt. Neither can we understand how He has been able to suffer eternal punishment in a few hours. We get a glimpse from his loneliness and agony when after the three hours He calls out:

Matthew 27:46

'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

It is heartrending thing for the Son of God to say to his Father. It can be very unsettling to read the history of Jesus' suffering in the bible. However, we should be careful to always see it in its context. Jesus was crucified for our wickedness. His Father deserted Him for our sins.

Jesus was dead and buried

Jesus' punishment came to an end. After three hours of complete darkness, He knew it had been sufficient and He called out: *'It is finished!'* The work was completed. The guilt of mankind had been paid. What Isaiah had announced had become reality: the servant of the LORD had taken the punishment on Him and people would be able to live in peace with God again.

Now that the price had been paid, there was only one thing left that had to happen. Jesus had to die. He told God: '*Father, in your hands I commit my spirit*', in other words: I give my life over to you. Then He bowed his head and died. He was taken from the cross and buried. However, death was not the conclusion of his life. We will come back to this in the next lesson.

Questions

1. At a very young age Jesus was wrongly accused and sentenced to death and crucified. However, we cannot say his life was a failure. Why not?
2. What relationship is there between Jesus and the Old Testament sacrifices?
3. Jesus knew exactly what was going to happen to Him. What was his attitude? Read Luke 22:39-44. 22:39 *disciples*: Jesus' special followers; 22:42 *this cup*: this suffering.
4. In what way was Jesus' the suffering more severe than that of other people?