

## ***Trusting the Promise in the Midst of the Test***

Genesis 22:1-14

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It came out of nowhere, as these things often do. It was the last thing Abraham would have expected. The text gives us no warning, so we are as shocked as Abraham when he hears what God asks. For ten chapters in Genesis, we have followed the story of Abraham as he obeyed God's call to leave his home and go to a land God would give him, as he believed through the years that God would indeed make him into a great nation. Over and over the promise was repeated, but the fulfillment depended on Abraham having a son. At one point, Abraham and Sarah became impatient and decided to produce an heir through a maid, but that was not the child of the promise, and in the end he had to be sent away. Finally, in their old age, God gave Abraham and Sarah a miracle baby whom they named Isaac, laughter. The promise is now coming true. All is well.

But then in chapter 22 God speaks again. "Abraham!" he calls out. "Yes, sir!" Abraham answers, "Here I am. What can I do for you, sir?" He was familiar with God's voice. They had developed a relationship of trust. "Then God said, 'Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.'" The text says nothing about what Abraham felt. It does not need to. If you are a parent, you cringe in horror. You picture your own child, whom you love, for whom you would give your own life, and you think: anything but that. How could God ask that?

People find it hard to believe that God would say this. Martin Luther's own wife said to him, "Martin, I don't believe that God would ask someone to sacrifice his only son." Many scholars and preachers have looked for ways to soften the story. Perhaps Abraham mistook the voice of Satan for the voice of God. Perhaps Abraham imagined it because he saw his neighbors with their pagan religion sacrificing their children to Moloch, and he thought that *his* God would ask no less. But to try to explain away the story is to fail to allow the Bible as we have received it to speak to us. The story may be troubling, and it may remain mysterious, but it is telling us something about our relationship with God. God asked Abraham to sacrifice his only son. Why?

Verse 1 gives us the framework for understanding the story: God *tested* Abraham. Abraham was to be the one through whom all nations would be blessed, and God had to know if he was ready to be the father of faith. We don't like the idea of putting people we love to the test, but the Bible understands that God has to test us for our own spiritual growth. God tested the people of Israel in the wilderness, both feeding them and making them hunger, so that they would learn to depend on God and not themselves. Jesus, of course, was tested before he began his ministry, and he taught us to pray "do not bring us to hard testing," but sometimes God brings us to hard testing anyway. James 1:3 (NIV) says "the testing of your faith develops perseverance."

God tested Abraham in order that their relationship could develop. It was not some kind of game with God. God really wanted to know if Abraham could trust him absolutely, and there was no way that he could find that out until Abraham was placed in a situation in which he had nothing to depend on but God's promise.

Sometimes God has to test us to allow our relationship to move to the next level. If everything stayed smooth, if everything was blessing, if there was no room for doubt, we would never learn to trust God absolutely. God really wants to know if we will trust him. Theologians have debated this for centuries, because it doesn't fit with the idea that God knows everything. But Genesis seems clear in verse 12; God says, "Now I know." Now I know something about our relationship that I did not know before this test. Personally, I believe that there is one thing that God does not know, because he gives us a measure of human freedom: God does not know whether we will trust him completely.

And, frankly, we do not know either. We like to think we will trust God when everything goes wrong, or when God seems to be contradicting himself—but how can we know unless we pass through the test. When you take a test in school, you do so not only so that the teacher will find out how much you know. *You* yourself need to find out how much you know.

Abraham is asked to trust God even when God appears not to be keeping his own promise. When Becca and I were in Florence two months ago, we saw the famous bronze doors designed by Lorenzo Ghiberti in 1425. One of the bronze panels tells this story. On the left we see Abraham in the foreground in the scene from Genesis 18, standing there with three angels bringing the promise of a son. Just above that stands Sarah wrapped in the folds of her tent, laughing at the promise. But on the right side of the panel, we see in the foreground a donkey and two servants, waiting for their master. And as the eye scans upward we see on a rocky mountaintop Abraham with his knife drawn, about to stab his son Isaac who is bound and kneeling on an altar, and we see an angel in midair reaching down to grab the knife. The two scenes go together. It is the juxtaposition of the promise and the command that creates the test. John Calvin said honestly, "The command and the promise are in conflict." Calvin said that this command from God meant the death of Abraham's faith, because he hears God contradicting himself. It is not clear to human reason how the two can come from the same God, but God is after all not required to be reasonable. God is God.

Abraham's response to God's command is absolute obedience. This time he does not argue with God or question him. He does not go to discuss this with other people to see what they think. He does not say anything to the boy's mother. He moves in silence. He does not wait, but early the next morning he gets up and saddles a donkey. The place where they are going is a three-day journey. He gathers wood for the burnt offering, because they would need a large fire on which to burn the sacrifice. He takes two servants with him, and his son Isaac. We hear nothing of the first two days, but on the third day Abraham sees the mountain where the sacrifice is to be made. I would have felt such dread that I could not have continued, but Abraham keeps on going. He tells the servants to stay behind with the donkey. "We will worship," he says, "and then we will come back to you." *We* will come back? When his son is going to be burned? Is he lying, just trying to keep things calm? Or is this the first sign we have that Abraham is hoping that somehow God will make a way for Isaac to be saved?

Abraham takes the wood for the burnt offering, the wood on which Isaac is to be laid, and he places it on Isaac's back. I grew up with a porcelain statue in my living room of a Japanese boy with a bundle of sticks on his back, and I think I always knew that this was not a mere woodcutter. I think I always knew that boy was Isaac, on the way to his own sacrifice. I think maybe it reminded my mother of Jesus, who carried his own wood. Isaac and Abraham walk along together, still in silence, Abraham carrying the fire and the knife. It is the boy who speaks. "Father?" "Yes, my son." "I see the fire and the wood, but if we're going to offer a burnt offering to God, where is the lamb?" What could the father say? Abraham could only say what he

believed: "God himself will provide the lamb." He did not know whether God would provide the lamb in the person of "my son," Isaac, whom he had given—or if he would provide, as Abraham kept hoping, some other way. But at this point all he could do was obey.

The test is whether Abraham will continue to trust in God when he has only the promise to go on. Hebrews 11:17-19 (NIV) says "By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.' Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death." Faith means believing in God for the impossible, believing that he can even raise the dead; it means believing that God will keep his promises even when there is no ground for believing, even when there appears to be no hope at all.

The real test of our spiritual life is not whether we trust God when he is acting in ways we understand, when he is responding to our faith with blessings. The real test is whether we trust God in the midst of a hard time, a dark time, when we cannot see how God can make a way. But that is the point of the test: we grow in our relationship to God by trusting his promise in the very midst of the period of testing.

This test for Abraham must have focused on this question: Why would God take away what he himself has given? Some of you have faced that question in the loss of children. Some of you have faced it in the loss of what you understood to be your vocation or an ability that you thought came from God. Some of you have lost a dream home—or your church—to a fire. Some of you have lost your sanity and were left to ask why God would take away your sense of reality.

So we ask what Abraham must have asked: why would God take from us what he himself has given? Why does God ask Moses to throw down his shepherd's rod? Why does Jesus ask the young ruler to give up his wealth? Why does Jesus ask Paul to give up his religion? Why would God ask for something that seems to be God's good gift?

But this test does not require a philosophical answer. This test requires trust. We must say with Abraham: God himself will provide. Once we release it to him as a sacrifice, God may provide by giving back what he has required. He may provide in some other way we have not dreamed of. But God will provide, because God is faithful. 1 Corinthians 10:13 (NRSV) says "God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it."

In Abraham's test, God spoke once again and gave a new command. He did not speak until the last possible moment. He waited until Abraham had tied up his only son whom he loved and laid him on the firewood. He waited until the knife was drawn, because until that point the test would have been incomplete. Abraham would never have known whether he trusted God absolutely if he had not been forced to look death and loss in the face. But now he knew, and God knew. And God said, "Stop. Do not lay a hand on the boy...now I know that you fear me, that you worship me truly, that you trust and obey, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son." It was not the blood that God wanted. It was not a death that he demanded. What he wanted was a sacrifice, and Isaac had been sacrificed. Abraham had given up what he loved most to God, and now God gave Isaac back to Abraham. There was a difference, though. Isaac now belonged to God, and he was only entrusted to Abraham's care. Abraham received back what he had offered to God, and he received it now as a gift twice-given, all the more precious because he knew the pain of giving it up.

God provided a substitute for Isaac. Abraham looked in the thicket, and there he saw a ram caught by its horns, provided by God to take the place of his son on the altar as a burnt

offering. Every time we speak of Jesus as the "Lamb of God" we are saying that he was the substitute provided as a sacrifice for us. God did not ask Abraham to do anything that God himself would not do. Romans 8:32 (NRSV) says that God "did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us." When God the Father was ready to sacrifice his Son whom he loved, his only Son, there was no angel there to stay his hand. There was no human voice telling him to stop. God did everything necessary to keep his promise that he would make Abraham a blessing to all the nations. He did that through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Even at the cost of his own Son, God kept his promise. That is how great his love is. That is why, even in the midst of a test that seems impossibly harsh or even absurd, we can trust in his promise of life.