

GENESIS 22:1–18. (EHV)

Some time later God tested Abraham. He called to him, "Abraham!" Abraham answered, "I am here." God said, "Now take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah. Offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains there, the one to which I direct you." Abraham got up early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, along with Isaac his son. Abraham split the wood for the burnt offering. Then he set out to go to the place that God had told him about. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will go on over there. We will worship, and then we will come back to you." Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and loaded it on Isaac his son. He took the firepot and the knife in his hand. The two of them went on together. Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, "My father?" He said, "I am here, my son." He said, "Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them went on together. They came to the place that God had told him about. Abraham built the altar there. He arranged the wood, tied up Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. The Angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, "Abraham, Abraham!" Abraham said, "I am here." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy. Do not do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." Abraham looked around and saw that behind him there was a ram caught in the thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. Abraham called the name of that place "The LORD Will Provide." So it is said to this day, "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided." The Angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven and said, "I have sworn by myself, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will bless you greatly, and I will multiply your descendants greatly, like the stars of the sky and like the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the city gates of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice."

Roughly 500 years following these events, as the Israelites were about to cross over the Jordan River and take possession of the land of Canaan, the Lord warned them through Moses not to worship him the way the inhabitants of that land had. "They do for their gods every detestable thing that the LORD hates," Moses told them. "They even burn their sons and daughters in fire for their gods" (Deut. 12:31).

One would think that Abraham would have had some concept of God's views on this practice when God came to him and said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah. Offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains there, the one to which I direct you." But in these days before God's officially recorded law, there must have been some way that God made it clear to Abraham that, whatever he usually felt about child sacrifice, this time was an exception, and he expected Abraham to obey.

Moses begins this account by telling us that this was a way that God tested Abraham. Indeed, this was the culmination of many tests of Abraham. God had called him out of Ur of Chaldeans, in modern day Iraq, to the land of Canaan, what we think of as Israel. But his father Terah decided to accompany him, and when his father Terah decided to settle in Haran instead, about halfway between Ur and Canaan, Abraham yielded. After all, family comes first, right?

So the Lord patiently waited until Terah died, and then he called Abraham again, promising to make him into a great nation and to bless him, and promising that all people on earth would be blessed through him. This promise itself was a test, since Abraham's wife Sarah was barren, and he was seventy-five years old and she was sixty-five. But Abraham believed the Lord, so he left and set out for Canaan with his family.

Abraham's faith was still weak, however. When he was forced to go to Egypt with his wife Sarah due to a famine, he lied to the Pharaoh and told him Sarah was his sister, not his wife, because even though Sarah was in her late sixties to early seventies, humans enjoyed longer lives back then and she was apparently still a strikingly beautiful woman, and Abraham was afraid that Pharaoh might kill him in order to take his wife. Abraham did not stop to think that God could not keep his promise and make him into a great nation if he was dead.

After God got him out of that mess, and even added to his possessions, and granted him success against four kings who had carried off his nephew and his family, God reaffirmed his promise to Abraham. In fact, he took him outside and told him to count the stars—an impossible task. "So shall your offspring be," the Lord told him. And Abraham believed the Lord.

Abraham's faith was still weak, however. Abraham was now eighty-five and his wife was seventy-five. Sarah was growing tired of waiting for children, so she told her husband to sleep with her maidservant Hagar so that Sarah could at least raise a family through her. This was not God's will, but Abraham faltered and took his wife's advice, and the son that came about from the union, Ishmael, not surprisingly brought tension to the family.

After God brought some relief to that situation, he appeared to Abraham again. Now Abraham was ninety-nine and his wife was eighty-nine. The Lord now gave him the covenant of circumcision as a sign of his promise to make Abraham into a great nation. Now Abraham had a visible sign of God's promise that he could never forget, a constant reminder. God also made another appearance to Abraham and his wife Sarah, along with two angels, and he promised that he would return the following year and Sarah would have a son. Abraham would be one hundred, Sarah ninety. God even demonstrated his power to keep this seemingly impossible promise by destroying the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and rescuing the family of Abraham's nephew, who lived in Sodom.

Abraham's faith still had room for growth, however. When Abraham shortly afterward moved to the land of the Philistines, he told the same lie about his wife that he had to Pharaoh in Egypt. God had to get him out of another mess.

In spite of Abraham's continued faltering, God kept his promise. Sarah gave birth to Isaac. To stress that Isaac, not Ishmael, was the child of God's promise, he had Abraham and Sarah send Hagar and Ishmael away, so that Isaac was now the only son in Abraham's household.

Now God comes to test Abraham again. "Take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah. Offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains

there, the one to which I direct you.” Now, how would you react? Twenty-five years of waiting for this son. And now, according to Jewish tradition, Isaac was twenty-five years old, so Abraham had had plenty of time to get to know him and to grow close to him in the way only a father and son can. Twenty-five years waiting for him, twenty-five years spent with him, and now God wants you to take him and slaughter him like an animal, and then to burn up his dead body completely, so that you don’t even have anything left of him to remember him by. How would you react?

Here’s how Abraham reacted: “Abraham got up early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, along with Isaac his son. Abraham split the wood for the burnt offering. Then he set out to go to the place that God had told him about.” There’s a relatively famous quote in Shakespeare’s play *Macbeth* where Macbeth says, “If it were done when ’tis done, then ’twere well it were done quickly.” That’s basically the principle Abraham followed: “If God wants me to do this, then I’m not going to let moss grow under my feet.”

He and his son and his servants traveled about forty miles northeast, and “on the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. Abraham said to his young men, ‘Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will go on over there. We will worship, and then we will come back to you.’” Did you hear that? This doesn’t sound like weak faith anymore, does it? “We will worship, and then *we* will come back to you.” The writer to the Hebrews explains that Abraham remembered God’s promise: “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” So the writer to the Hebrews explains that Abraham reasoned that if God was really going to have him sacrifice his son, then he would also have to raise his son from the dead in order to keep his promises.

Of course, it’s one thing to say that before making the sacrifice, and another thing actually to make the sacrifice, especially when your son starts talking to you about it beforehand: “Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and loaded it on Isaac his son. He took the firepot and the knife in his hand. The two of them went on together. Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, ‘My father?’ He said, ‘I am here, my son.’ He said, ‘Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?’ Abraham said, ‘God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.’ So the two of them went on together.”

Now they reach their destination. There’s a city on a hill not too far away. Other than that, they are alone on the mountain. “Abraham built the altar there. He arranged the wood, tied up Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar on top of the wood.” And we don’t hear any complaining from Isaac. Now Abraham reaches out his hand. He takes the knife. He is going to slaughter his son.

And that’s all the farther he needs to go. God saw not only the actions demonstrating Abraham’s trust in his promises; he also saw Abraham’s heart. He saw the trust itself and the accompanying resolve to obey the Lord’s will. So the Angel of the Lord spoke up.

“Abraham! Abraham!”

“I am here,” he replied.

“Do not lay your hand on the boy,” he said. “Do not do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.”

Then Abraham looked around and saw a ram caught by its horns in a thicket. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering in place of his son.

So Abraham's faith was not only demonstrated; it was also validated. Abraham reasoned that God was going to raise his son Isaac from the dead, and the writer to the Hebrews says that, figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death, because he was all set to sacrifice him. But God spared him and provided a substitute sacrifice in place of his son. Abraham's offspring would indeed be reckoned through Isaac, and all nations on earth would be blessed through him.

There's something familiar about all of this, isn't there? "Your son, your only son, whom you love"? "Offer him as an offering"? Uncomplaining to the point of death? A substitute sacrifice?

Moses spells it out even more for us: "Abraham called the name of that place 'The LORD Will Provide.' So it is said to this day, 'On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided.'" In other words, Abraham names the mountain in this region of Moriah The LORD Will Provide, and roughly 500 years later when Moses wrote these words down, people who had heard Abraham share his story were still saying, "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided."

I don't know in what context people would say that. Maybe when someone was taking a journey to the top of a mountain or over a mountain and was worried whether he had enough provisions, others would reassure him by saying, "Remember Abraham? Don't worry; on the mountain of the LORD it will be provided." Or maybe they were actually saying it as a prophecy. But whatever the case, Moses records that saying because it was a prophecy. This not the last time we hear about a mountain in Moriah. That city on a hill not far away from where Abraham almost sacrificed his son that I mentioned earlier? That was the city of Salem, later called Jerusalem. We know that because later in 2 Chronicles 3, we're told that Solomon began to build the temple of the Lord north of Jerusalem on Mount Moriah.

That means that it was around this same area where substitute sacrifices were offered for the sins of the people every day in the temple. On the mountain of the LORD it was provided. That also means that it was around this same area, perhaps at the very same spot, where the Lord provided the ultimate, once-and-for-all sacrifice for all the sins of the world. On the mountain of the LORD it was provided.

And whom did God provide and sacrifice? His Son. His only Son. Whom he loved. Not a son whom he had been waiting for for twenty-five years and then had spent twenty-five years with. A Son who had been right there at his side from all eternity. A Son he was not just really close to, but a Son whom he was and is actually one with. And when God the Father took out the knife, so to speak, to slay his Son on Good Friday, the Angel of the Lord did not hold him back. Because the Angel of the Lord was his Son, now in human flesh, on the cross.

Now you tell me: If Abraham being willing to sacrifice his only son for God was the ultimate convincer for God himself that Abraham trusted and feared God, then when God is not just willing, but actually does provide and sacrifice his only Son for us, of what should that convince us about God? Does he trust and fear us? No, the Bible tells us there's a different characteristic on display: "For God so *loved* the world that he [actually] gave his one and only Son."

Here Abraham first demonstrated his faith, and then God validated it. But for us, friends, God has already validated any faith we might put in him in the most convincing way. As Paul put

it, if God did not spare his own Son for us, how can he not also along with him graciously give us all things?

So all that's left for us is to demonstrate our faith in the love God has already shown. All that's left for us is not to sacrifice our children to him in the fire; he does not desire that. What he desires is that we offer ourselves as living sacrifices to him, that we devote ourselves entirely to him, sacrifice our time, skills, hobbies, and money to him, that we sacrifice our spouse and children to him by sharing his love with them, that we sacrifice property and home, job and reputation and all we love to him by not letting them stand in the way between us and him.

The Lord provided for us on his mountain. Our faith has already been validated. All that's left is a lifetime for it to be demonstrated. "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? ... For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." The Lord has provided for us on his mountain, and one day the Lord will provide for us on *the* mountain forever—the mountain of his eternal dwelling. Amen.