



Temple Baptist Church
Wilmington, North Carolina
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Abraham: "The LORD Will Provide"
Genesis 22:1-14; Hebrews 11:17-19

As *unreasonable* as it had been, when God had called him to leave his father's house and his kin and country, to go to a land God would show him, he had obeyed.

As *unlikely* as it had seemed, he had believed God when he told him the land of Canaan would belong to his descendants, who would be as countless as the stars in the sky and as innumerable as the sand on the seashore.

As *unbelievable* as it had been, he had taken God at his word when God promised him an heir in his old age. He and his wife Sarah waited and waited for years—about 25 years, in fact. And the wait started when he was 75 and she was 65! His faith may have wavered at times, and sometimes he and Sarah took things into their own hands, making a mess of things. Yet when all was said and done, he believed God's promise and saw it fulfilled as Isaac was born when he was 100 and Sarah was 90.

God had reckoned his faith to him as righteousness (Romans 4:22), and it seemed like everything was coming together for Abraham, *the friend of God* (James 2:23) and father of all who believe (Romans 4).

But what God asked for next must have seemed to him beyond reason, beyond any sense, beyond all belief!

A troubling command

It had been one thing—a huge thing, to be sure—to leave his father's house and set out on a journey when he didn't know the destination. "I'll tell you when you get there," God had told him. But Abraham had believed God, taken him at his word, and obeyed.

With no logical reason whatsoever to base it on, he had taken God at his word again—first about his promise to give the land of Canaan to his descendants when he had none, and then about his promise to give him a son.

Now God was commanding Abraham to take this son he had given him—the one he had told Abraham he was going to fulfill his promises through—and to go to a mountain he would show him, **and offer him there as a burnt offering** to God (Genesis 22:1-2).

Now I have to admit that for many of us, this is one of the most troubling passages in the Bible. How in the world could God ask Abraham to sacrifice his son as a burnt offering? That's what the pagans thought their gods wanted them to do. Wasn't the LORD supposed to be different from them?

Biblical interpreters and theologians and preachers have wrestled with this text through the centuries. And when we read it from our own twenty-first century perspective, we shudder at the thought that God would even *ask* for such a sacrifice, much less *command* it!

And yet, that's what the text tells us. It doesn't try to justify God or explain why he gave

such a command, except to say that he was *testing* Abraham.

Maybe we need to look at this text on its own terms, from its own ancient perspective, rather than imposing our twenty-first century sensibilities on it. Because when we do, we see an amazing story of *obedience* and *faith*.

An amazing story

So laying our contemporary ethical concerns about the story aside, and looking at it through the lens of ancient faith, what do we see?

We see God commanding Abraham to offer to him what is, next to his wife Sarah, most dear to him—his son. And in offering *their* son, can you imagine what the effect would be on Sarah? It was as though he would be offering her too! And in a very real sense, he would be offering himself as well, because his heart was bound up in this boy, this son of his old age, this son God had promised them, this son they had waited for so long.

But now God was commanding this sacrifice.

Can you imagine what must have been going through Abraham's mind? God's command was totally senseless and illogical. Isaac was the child of promise. It was through Isaac that God would fulfill those promises he had made to Abraham. So how could God fulfill his promise if Abraham sacrificed Isaac? That would be to kill the means by which God was to fulfill his promise!

I'm sure that you and I would have thought of this command from a thousand different angles, all with the hope of concluding that we were mistaken about God's command, that somehow we had misunderstood or misheard God about the whole thing.

Maybe one of the most incredible things about the story is that nothing is said about Abraham's struggle. We can't imagine that there wasn't one, but the text simply tells us that he obeyed what God told him to do.

So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him (Genesis 22:3).¹

The text just says he did as God told him. Incredible!

Now there's no way we can know what was in Abraham's mind at this point. Many have speculated that deep in his heart, he believed that God wouldn't let him go through with it, that he knew it was a test.

But if he knew God wouldn't let him go through with it, then why did he take everything he needed for the sacrifice? Why did he prepare an altar? Why did he bind Isaac and put him on that altar? And why did he take the knife in his hand and raise it to slay his son?

Can you imagine what that must have been like for Isaac? Or what it must have been like for Abraham when on the way up the mountain Isaac asked, ***"Father! . . . The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"*** (22:7). Can you imagine what it was like for Abraham as his son looked at him confused and bewildered as Abraham prepared him for the sacrifice?

When Isaac asked Abraham about the lamb for the sacrifice, Abraham answered, ***"God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son"*** (22:8).

Some might take that to mean that Abraham thought God wouldn't let him go through with

it. His statement to his servants that he and the boy would go worship and then return to them (22:5) seems to support that view.

But the writer of the book of Hebrews takes a different approach. In Hebrews 11:17-19, he says that in his willingness to obey and his going through with it until the angel of the LORD stopped him just before he slew Isaac, Abraham did in fact offer him as a sacrifice. He had earlier embraced God's promises, and was willing to do this even though he knew that God had said he would fulfill these promises through Isaac. So the writer of Hebrews draws the conclusion that ***Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death*** (Hebrews 11:19, NIV). In other words, Abraham was willing to obey God, because he believed God would do what he said he would do, even if it meant raising Isaac from the dead!

No wonder he named that mountain ***"The LORD will provide"*** (Genesis 22:14)!

You see, looking at this story on its own terms, what it all boils down to is simply this: *Abraham was willing to offer Isaac to God because he believed the LORD would provide, whatever that took.*

The continuing story

This story is true for more than just Abraham, you know. It challenges us and reminds us that *God calls us to a simple, deep, abiding trust*—the kind of trust in which we're willing to give up *everything* to him and trust him with all we are and have, to relinquish control to him, to obey him in love, *not* because we *have* to, but because we *want* to. It's the kind of trust that believes God even when it seems impossible to believe him, even when all the evidence *seems* to say otherwise.

Do you remember the "Mr. McBevee" episode of *The Andy Griffith Show*? Opie has met Mr. McBevee, a telephone line construction worker, out in the woods. Opie has described him to Andy and Barney as walking in the trees, wearing a shiny silver hat, making smoke come out of his ears, and jingling when he walks because he has twelve extra hands on his belt. Andy and Barney of course think Mr. McBevee is imaginary, like Opie's horse Blackie. But when he gives Opie a hatchet and then a quarter, Andy decides it's time to bring Opie back to reality. He insists that Opie admit that Mr. McBevee is just make-believe. But Opie can't, because he knows that's not true. He looks at Andy and says, "Don't you believe me, Pa?" After a pause, Andy says he does, then goes downstairs where Aunt Bee and Barney are waiting.

He tells them he didn't punish him, and then Barney asks, "Well, what did you tell him?"

Andy says, "I told him I believe him."

Barney protests, "You told him you beli . . . But Andy, what he told you's impossible!"

Andy tells Barney, "Well, a whole lotta times I've asked him to believe things that, to his mind, musta seemed just as impossible."

Barney still protests, "Oh, but, Andy . . . this silver hat, and the jinglin', and the smoke from his ears—what about all that?"

Andy says, "Ohh, I don't know, Barn. I guess it's a time like this when you're asked to believe somethin' that just don't seem possible. That's the moment that decides whether you got faith in somebody or not."

Barney asks, "Yeah, but how can you explain it all?"

Andy replies, "I cain't."

Barney says, "But you do believe in Mr. McBeevee?"

And Andy says, "No, no, no. I DO believe in Opie."²

That's the kind of faith God wants—to believe him when we don't see how, when it doesn't make sense.

Because you see, *as we trust him—yielding to and depending on him completely— he will provide all we need to do his will!*

He has provided for us in so many ways—in creation, in our salvation through the sacrifice and resurrection of *his* only Son, and in our daily walk with him.

And because he has, we can be confident that he will provide everything we need to do what he calls us to do when we're willing to obey him.

Now we can talk about obeying God all day long. We can put it in abstract terms and lofty language about the duty of obedience and doing what we ought to do.

But here's where the rubber meets the road: *Obedying God is ultimately a matter of trust!* We do what he asks us to do because we *believe* he'll do what he says he will do. It all grows out of a loving, trusting relationship with our heavenly Father—a relationship that comes through faith in Jesus Christ, *God the Father's* only Son, whom *he* gave as a sacrifice for our sins and raised from the dead so we could have life in him!

This kind of obedience can be costly. I saw it back in 2009 the first time I went to Belize in Central America to teach in the Baptist Bible School, an effort to provide basic theological training to pastors and church leaders.

Two of the students were husband and wife, Donovan and Lisa. He used to be a teacher in what we would call elementary school. The Bible school would meet for one week in January, May, and August. The previous year, one of those sessions met while the elementary school was in session. The school administrator wouldn't agree for Donovan to be off to attend the Bible School session.

Donovan believed deeply that God had called him to attend the Baptist Bible School of Belize to develop his skills for more effective ministry.

So do you know what he did?

He quit his teaching job, and began his own welding business—so he could take off whenever he needed to for class and for ministry needs.

When God told Abraham to take Isaac and offer him as a sacrifice, Abraham obeyed. He obeyed because he believed God. He trusted God to the point that he knew God would keep his promises to him, even if that meant God would have to raise Isaac from the dead to do it!

What is he asking *you* to do?

Will you trust him and do it?

†MEG

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible.

² Season 3, Episode 1 (10/1/1962). <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0512516/> (accessed 7/24/2017).