

“The Lord Will Provide,” Genesis 22:1-19 (Twenty-Sixth Sunday After Pentecost, November 18, 2018)

After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.”² He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.”³ So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him.⁴ On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar.⁵ Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.”⁶ And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together.⁷ And Isaac said to his father Abraham, “My father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?”⁸ Abraham said, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So they went both of them together.

⁹ When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.¹⁰ Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son.¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.”¹² He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.”¹³ And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.¹⁴ So Abraham called the name of that place, “The LORD will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.”

¹⁵ And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven¹⁶ and said, “By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son,¹⁷ I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies,¹⁸ and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.”¹⁹ So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba. And Abraham lived at Beersheba.

PRAY

Today we finish our fall sermon series on the life of Abraham in the book of Genesis. More than one commentator has said that what Abraham does here in Genesis 22 is the single greatest act of faith in human history. I think that’s absolutely right.

The more I studied this passage over the past week, the more in awe I was of what Abraham did. In fact, the more I studied this the more convinced I was that I really don’t understand how Abraham could do this. And, frankly, I don’t think you will be able to, either.

But that's all the more reason to study it. In Hebrews 11:1, we read the Bible's definition of faith: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Boy, that's Abraham in Genesis 22. And we'll look at what happened in this passage under two headings: first, the test of faith. Second, the provision of God.

First, the test of faith. "After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' ² He said, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.'" Genesis 22:1-2.

The initial, reflexive response modern people have to these verses is, "How monstrous! The God of the Bible must be some sort of demented, blood-thirsty deity if he would command someone to murder his own son!"

I think such a response is understandable. God's command shocked Abraham, so it's not surprising that it shocks us. But it shocks us for a different reason.

God did not command Abraham to *murder* Isaac. If that had been the command, God would have just said, "Abraham, walk over to Isaac right now and stab him." Rather, God commanded Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice, and that was something different altogether.

Child sacrifice was a fact of life in the ancient world. They did not consider it murder. They believed that you owed the gods your life, and they had every right to demand your firstborn from you as payment.

Later on in the law of Moses God made it clear he did not want Israel to sacrifice their children, that child sacrifice is an abomination to him. But Abraham couldn't be sure of that. He's still learning who God is at this point. He lived before the law of Moses, and even in the law God says that the firstborn son belongs to him and must be redeemed with an animal sacrifice.

If God had said, "Abraham, go stab Isaac right now," or if God had said, "Abraham, take Sarah your wife and offer her as a burnt offering," Abraham would have said, "No way! This is not God speaking to me but some demon." But in Abraham's world, God could rightly demand the firstborn as a payment for the father's sins.

Child sacrifice did not shock the conscience of Abraham the way it does us. But Abraham was, nevertheless, shocked by God's command to sacrifice Isaac. Why? *Because God's command to sacrifice Isaac directly contradicted God's promise about Isaac.*

What was God's promise to Abraham? Genesis 17:19: "... Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him."

The test of Abraham's faith was that God promised that he would establish a covenant with Isaac, and that through Isaac God would make for Abraham a great nation of many descendants,

and through that nation all the peoples on the face of the earth would be blessed. ***Yet now God says, “Abraham, you must kill Isaac before he can have any descendants.”***

God’s promise to Abraham and God’s command to Abraham contradict each other. This is the test of faith threatened to tear Abraham in two.

In verse 5 we read: “Then Abraham said to his young men, ‘Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.’” And then in verses 7-8 we read this: “And Isaac said to his father Abraham, ‘My father!’ And he said, ‘Here I am, my son.’ He said, ‘Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?’⁸ Abraham said, ‘God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.’ So they went both of them together.”

These are the only two things we read that Abraham said after he received the command to sacrifice Isaac, and *boy do the commentators try to psychoanalyze Abraham through them!* They wonder, “Is Abraham deliberately lying to his servants and to Isaac by implying that Isaac will survive this test? Or is Abraham just being evasive because he doesn’t want to tell them or Isaac the truth?”

But the answer is clear: Abraham really believes it. **He fully intends to obey God’s command, but he also fully believes God will keep his promise.**

Soren Kierkegaard, the world-renowned Danish philosopher, wrote a little book on Genesis 22 called *Fear and Trembling*. It’s the only thing he ever wrote that I’ve been able to understand. In it he says Abraham had to believe the absurd. You know what absurd means? “Wildly unreasonable and illogical.” God’s promise and God’s command were, together, absurd. They made no sense. There was no way Abraham could reconcile the two. It’s literally impossible.

Yet Abraham believed both anyway. Do you see why this is the greatest act of faith in human history? Kierkegaard said he would give anything to be able to trust God like that.

Now, what application is there for us today from this text? Some people teach that the lesson of Abraham and Isaac is that if you think God is calling you to do something crazy then you’ve got to do it. Is that true?

First of all, let’s be clear: God will never ask you to do something like this. Abraham did not have the law which said, “It is an abomination to sacrifice your son.” We do – we know this is not God’s will. If you hear a voice that says, “Offer up your child on the altar to me,” you can be sure that it’s not God. It might be the devil, but it’s not the Lord.

Or, maybe you do feel led to do something radical or risky with your life in an attempt to serve the Lord, something that won’t harm anyone but seen as just crazy by the people around you. Maybe the feeling is so strong that you feel like God has spoken to you. Do you have to do it?

No. Just because you feel strongly about something doesn’t make it a command from God. If

you do wind up doing something radical, great, that's your choice, but don't blame Genesis 22 for it. This passage is not about knowing whether or not God has spoken to you.

But you know what he has certainly called you to do? *Love one another. Serve one another. Be kind and compassionate to one another. Forgive one another.* And in this world in which we live *that's crazy and radical enough.*

Here's the question: will you be faithful to this call on your life no matter how hard it gets?

In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul says something interesting. He's talking about his labors to get the early church off the ground and he says, "I die every day—I mean that, brothers—just as surely as I glory over you in Christ Jesus our Lord. If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus for merely human reasons, what have I gained? If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.'" 1 Corinthians 15:31-32 (NIV 1984).

By that Paul means, "I firmly trust God has appointed me for this work. God has called me to do this. But it is hard. It was so hard in Ephesus that I had to fight off wild animals. But even on the easier days, I still feel like I'm dying as I seek to be faithful to God's call on my life. Therefore, my only hope is that God will raise me up."

That's the test of faith—when it feels like a death, will we trust that somehow God will raise us up?

But what might that look like for us? Here's an idea, a minor example of dying in faith. Paul Miller is an author and speaker. He came to Oxford back in February and led us in a conference on prayer. In one of his books he tells the story of Kayla.

Kayla raised money and gave up a week of her time to go work as a short-term, volunteer missionary at a summer camp for families affected by disability. She loved working with people in this community and thought it might be what she would do with the rest of her life.

On the second day of the camp, however, a mother claimed that Kayla had said something negative about her parenting. The mother complained to the camp directors, who in turn investigated this allegation about Kayla. Multiple people got involved, and there was no resolution.

The camp leadership handled the situation as best they could. But no matter what they did, and no matter what Kayla did, a cloud hung over her reputation at the camp and in the ministry.

Eventually, Kayla, distraught, came to Paul and his wife Jill, who were also at the camp. Kayla thought her ministry was over. But here's what the Millers told her. They said, "Kayla, your ministry has gone to a whole new level. Before this happened, you were in a transaction. It was a good transaction. You were giving your time and money and receiving back thanks and the joy of knowing that you were helping others. Now you are getting nothing back. Instead of honor, you are getting dishonor. Instead of thanks, you are getting misunderstanding. It feels like a death, but in dying you are learning to love in new and deeper ways."

But the question for Kayla was, “Would she believe it? Would she continue serve and love others even under that cloud?” It was the test of faith.

All of us will face this test. In your marriage, there will be long seasons, when you’ll feel like you are giving and giving and giving and getting nothing back. Will you still love your spouse?

You’ll certainly face the test of faith as a parent. Being a parent is by definition humiliating. Your kids will embarrass you, and you’ll feel like you’re getting nothing back. Will you lose your temper and start relating to them out of guilt and fear and anger or will you continue to love them and be patient with them and point them to Jesus? Conversely, parents will sin against their children. Will you, children, continue to trust God by honoring your parents even when they’ve hurt you? You’ll face this test at work, you’ll face it with your friendships, you’ll face this test at church. You can’t escape the test of faith. God will see to it that it comes.

At one point John Calvin says, “For the Christian, death is the way to life and the cross is the way to victory.” And that sounds all good and inspiring until it’s your life that feels like it’s ending. You’ll know you’re loving someone when it feels like a death to you. Until then, it’s a positive transaction. You’ll know you’re serving someone when they start to treat you like a slave. Until then, it’s a happy volunteering experience. When it gets hard, will you still love and obey and trust that God is in control? That’s the test of faith.

Second, the provision of God. Let’s read verses 9-10: “⁹ When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son.”

All the commentators note how time slows down when you get to these verses. We sprint through the three-day journey to Moriah in a few words, but once Abraham and Isaac get there the narrator takes his time and points out the altar, then the wood for the fire, the binding of Isaac, the hand reaching for the knife. The unthinkable is about to happen.

But then, relief with verses 11-12: “But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, ‘Abraham, Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ ¹² He said, ‘Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.’” Genesis 22:11-12.

Abraham survived the test of faith, and at the last possible second God provided. Abraham obeyed the command, and God kept his promise. ***Abraham got Isaac back.*** “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, ¹⁸ of whom it was said, ‘Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.’ ¹⁹ He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.” Hebrews 11:17-19.

Now, does that mean that whatever you have to give up in order to trust God and obey him –your reputation (like Kayla), or your pride, or your ability to get your way in a certain circumstance,

or your job, money, family(!) – that if you just have enough faith you will get it all back?

No, it doesn't. Maybe you will and maybe you won't. But I can promise you this: *you'll never get to know Jesus unless you're willing to surrender your most precious things in order to find him.* Until that point comes, you're just playing at being a Christian. You're just operating out of your own strength and wisdom.

In Philippians 3, the apostle Paul talks about what all he had before he became a follower of Jesus. He gives us his resume, and for that place and time it was extraordinary. He tells us he was of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, and member of the Pharisees and, when it came to keeping the law of God, he was flawless.

To put that in our terms, he was from a family that has been respected in the community for generations. His pedigree was unmatched. He got his undergraduate degree from Harvard and his graduate degree from Yale. His education was unmatched. And in his chosen profession he was the best in the country. His skills and natural abilities were unmatched.

But then we read this beginning in verse 7: “⁷ But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.” Philippians 3:7-9 (NIV 1984).

All that stuff I used to be so proud of, Paul says, all that stuff I worked so hard for before I met Jesus, I've given it all up to know Jesus. But now I see that compared to knowing Jesus, it was all just excrement anyway. It's all just the stuff you flush down your toilet compared to him.

We read that and wonder, “How could anyone possibly say that and possibly mean it?” Here's how: it's great to have a good reputation and be viewed with respect in the community, it's awesome to get your way and have money and a job you love. It's great to have all those things, *but it's awful when those things have you.* And friends if you find you can never give those things up under any circumstances, they don't really belong to you, do they? You belong to them. They don't serve you; you are a slave to them.

What Paul found was when he was willing to let all those things go for the sake of Christ ... in other words, when he was willing to *die to them*, on the other side he found all the blessings he hoped those things would give him without any of the slavery. You see, as human beings, we don't really need reputation, pride, respect, job, money. We don't. What we really need, what we were built for, is freedom. “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” 2 Corinthians 3:17. We were built for freedom, joy, love, and peace.

But Paul found that if he was willing to trust God with his precious things, then no matter what he had to give up he would get the blessings because God himself would provide. That's why Paul could say, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, to attain to the

resurrection from the dead.” Philippians 3:10-11 (NIV 1984). Paul died every day to trust God, but when he did he found God always raised him up.

Abraham found that, too. He trusted God with his most precious thing and on the other side God raised him up.

“So Abraham called the name of that place, ‘The LORD will provide’; as it is said to this day, ‘On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.’” Genesis 22:14. The Hebrew word translated as “provide” literally means “to see.” Our English word “provide” comes from a Latin phrase (provideo) which means “to see far ahead.” So you know what Abraham was saying? He was saying, “The Lord holds my future in his hands, and he *will see to it* that I get what I need.”

Friends, if you are willing to keep walking up your own personal Mount Moriah and offer up to God your most precious things, whatever they are, God will see to it that you get what your heart most desperately needs. It may be at the last moment, it may be when you feel like you have the knife in your hand and you’re about to kill your hopes off all by yourself, but God will intervene and provide freedom, joy, love, and peace.

And you say, “How? How can I trust God enough to do that like Abraham?” Let’s be clear: you won’t. You won’t demonstrate the faith in God Abraham did, and neither will I. His faith was the greatest the world has ever known, and we won’t surpass it.

But we can always trust God more than we do now. The way we grow in our faith is by looking at what the Lord has already done for us. God told Abraham on Mount Moriah, “Now I know you love me because you did not withhold your son, your only son, whom you love, from me.” You know what we can do? We can look to Mount Moriah and see how much God loves us, too.

In the book of 2 Chronicles we read that Jerusalem was built on Moriah. And some two thousand years after Isaac carried the wood on his back up the mount to the place where he would be sacrificed, Jesus Christ carried the wood of the cross on his back up that same mountain. Isaac didn’t die, because Abraham said, “The Lord will provide a lamb, my son.” But Jesus Christ was the lamb provided by God, the lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world, and on Mount Moriah he was sacrificed in our place.

Friends, in asking you to trust him with your most precious things, ***God is not asking you to do anything he hasn’t already done himself!*** Romans 8:32 says, “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” God surrendered his son Jesus Christ on Moriah at the cross to pay for our sins and reconcile us to him, so now we can walk up our own little Moriahs and offer up our precious things and rejoice and say, “***Now, now*** I know you love me, because you did not withhold your son, your only son, whom you love, from me.”

You’ll never grow in your faith by trying to grow in your faith. You’ll grow in your faith by looking to Jesus. By seeing how God gave his most precious thing for you. And then your heart will melt, and you’ll want to trust him more and more with everything in your life.

In Isaiah 28:16 (NIV 1984) there is a prophecy about Jesus: “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trusts will never be dismayed.” Oh friends, no one ever trusted in Jesus and wound up dismayed. Climb your Moriah, whatever it is, look to Jesus and offer up your most precious things to the Lord, and he will see to your blessing. AMEN