

THE PARADOX OF FAITH

Genesis 22:1-14
Hebrews 11:1, 17-19

With the testing comes the provision.

A sermon preached by
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We live in a culture that is fascinated with the shocking story. Television, radio, and print journalism all rely on the sensational to sell. “If it bleeds, it leads” is standard operating procedure. Why do you think soap operas stay on the air for decades? Is it because they portray examples of decent and moral behavior? I think not.

We are particularly fascinated with the suffering of the innocent. Stories of child abuse and parents who kill their children shock, sadden, and sicken us. But they never fail to make the news. The whole idea is horrible beyond imagining, that anyone could do such a thing.

Hardly a week goes by without a story of a priest or preacher who has abused a child. That, too, is so wrong. How could a person of faith do that? How could someone who serves God do irreparable harm to a child? It’s inconceivable, but it gets our attention.

I believe when the ancient Hebrews heard the story of God asking Abraham to sacrifice his son, they would have had the same reaction we do to a child-killer or a pedophile priest. This was a shocking story. In the first place, they could not believe that God would ask Abraham to do such a thing. The Hebrew religion explicitly condemned child sacrifice. Some of the pagan religions around Canaan practiced human sacrifice, particularly to a god named Molech. But such an inhumane practice was an abomination to the Hebrews.

Not only was child sacrifice horrible, it was contrary to all logic. Why would God give Isaac to Abraham and Sarah in their old age, to be the ancestor of a multitude of nations, and then ask Abraham to kill his only son? That was crazy, contradictory, and illogical. It was just wrong. Consequently, the people who heard this story—from ancient Hebrews around the campfire and later in their synagogues to Christians in the early church up to today—have been fascinated with it. We’re all ears.

The story itself is simple enough. One day, out of the blue, without warning, God told Abraham to take “*your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love,*”¹ the child of the promise, the hope of the family, the one who had brought joy to their old hearts, the one whose name meant

“Laughter.” God said take him to the Land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering. Mount Moriah is the hill in the middle of modern-day Jerusalem where the Temple was, and where today the great mosque the Dome of the Rock is. It is a sacred site for three world religions.

Abraham didn’t even argue; he just did what he was told. For three days they traveled, with Abraham knowing every step of the way what lay ahead. Why in the world would God ask him to do such a thing? When they reached Moriah, Abraham laid the wood for the fire on Isaac’s back, and he took the knife and the fire-starter, and up the hill they went.

Isaac, who was probably at least a teenager, was beginning to get a little worried, and he commented to his father, “I see the fire and the knife, and I have the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”

Abraham replied, “God himself will provide the lamb for the offering, my son.” Was the old man simply being deceptive, or was he hoping against hope that God would provide another way, that he would not have to go through with it after all?

When they reached the top of the mountain, Abraham laid out the wood and began to tie Isaac up. The amazing thing is, Isaac let him! I think the faith of Isaac often goes unnoticed in this story, as he allowed his father to prepare him for the sacrifice. Isaac trusted his father, despite all evidence to the contrary. He did not believe that Abraham would harm him, or if he did, it would be the right thing to do. That’s amazing faith!

So Abraham took the knife in his hand and raised it up. With the other hand he held his son steady. For a moment their eyes met—eyes full of love and hope and fear and panic and pain and frustration all at the same time. Abraham tensed his muscles to thrust the knife into his son’s body, and the Voice called out, “Abraham! Abraham!”

Abraham nearly collapsed. “Here I am!”

The Voice said, “*Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.*”² Abraham probably thought, “Lord, I could have just *told* you that!”

Suddenly there was a rustle in the bushes, and Abraham saw a ram that had been caught by the horns in a thicket. Together father and son offered the ram as a burnt offering and named the spot “Jehovah jireh,” which means “God provides.” Not only had God provided the animal for the sacrifice, God had given Abraham his son back. God had given Isaac his life back. God had restored the hope of the nation.

What are we to make of this challenging, bizarre, fascinating story? Though it has a basis in history, it is more about theology now than an event in the past. What does this mean? What is the point of faith? Does it even make sense to believe in a God who would do something like that?

The first thing we learn from this story is that **GOD IS GOD**. This is not a God we can domesticate. God can make demands and call us to do things that we don’t understand, and we just have to deal with that. God will be the God God wants to be and not the God we want to make God be. The Creator of the universe will not fit in our little God-boxes. Our God is unpredictable, passionate, jealous, mysterious, powerful, and dangerous. I love this God precisely because I can’t grasp all that God is. I just bow down and worship.

The writer Annie Dillard has an amazing comment on our relationship to this awesome God:

“Why do we people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute? ...On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.”³

Relating to a God like that is one part fear and one part gratitude. We don’t know exactly what God will do, but we know that ultimately God is good, and God will be good to us.

It’s like the beginning of a roller coaster ride. I don’t like roller coasters. But the few times I have been on one, there is always that initial ascent before you go over the hill and start the stomach-flips. In that slow phase, I am always asking the existential questions: “Why am I here? What will happen to me?” There is fear, because I know at some point we’re going over that hump, and I hope to God I will survive the ride. And there is gratitude, because at the moment we are just slowly ascending, and I keep reminding myself that statistically very few people actually die from roller coasters.

That’s how it is to walk deeply with God. We don’t know exactly what is on the other side of the hill. We don’t know what God will do, what God will ask of us, where God will call us into ministry. It’s a little scary. But we are grateful for what God has already done, and we trust that God will be good to us, that the Lord will go with us wherever we are sent, and that we will survive when the ride gets crazy. We just have to have faith.

We understand from this story that **FAITH IS A RADICAL ACT**. The Letter to the Hebrews defines faith as “*the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*”⁴ This is counter-intuitive; it is a radically different way of looking at things. The world says hatred and revenge against your enemies; faith says love and forgiveness. The world says keep; faith says give. The world says be served; faith says serve. The world loves power; faith loves weakness. The world sees death as our ultimate destination; faith gives us the hope of heaven. Faith goes against everything our scientific, materialistic world says about reality. It requires a leap into another way of being and knowing.

The late Larry King was a world-famous TV and radio personality for many years. He conducted thousands of interviews and covered many shocking stories. Once when he was being interviewed, he admitted, “I can’t make that leap that a lot of people around me have made into belief that there’s some judge somewhere. I have a lot of respect for true people of faith.... I’m too in my head to be into faith. Faith is a wonderful thing. I envy people who have it. I just can’t make the leap.

“I remember as a kid, my father died when I was young, and that was unexplainable to me. The God of the Old Testament, I didn’t like things he did. ‘Abraham, sacrifice your son.’ That always bothered me as a kid. I remember thinking, *Why would he do that to Abraham? As a test?* So I said to myself, *I don’t know. I just don’t know.* That’s still true to this day.”⁵ Kind of sad, don’t you think?

Abraham’s whole life was a testimony to radical faith. He left his home in Haran to travel to a land God would show him. He believed the promise that he would have a son in his old age.

And he was willing to give up that son, against all human logic, when God asked him to. This story is the climax of the Abraham narrative in Genesis. It is the ultimate test of faith for the father of faith, and he passed with flying colors.

Finally, we learn from this story that **WITH THE TESTING COMES THE PROVISION.** When we face the tests of life, when we are caught in the hard places, when life becomes a crazy roller-coaster, we can depend on God to provide for us. That's when we feel the gratitude. We are grateful for the gift of God's graciousness in our time of trouble. With the testing comes the provision.

This week one of our friends lost her husband suddenly. It was very similar to the way my wife Carey lost her first husband thirteen years ago. At the funeral on Friday, Carey told our friend, "I never wanted you to be in this club. It's horrible and terrible and painful. But you will make it through. You are surrounded by so many people who love you. And on some of those terrible, painful days, you will be overwhelmed by a sense of peace. That's when other people are praying for you. And you'll know you're going to make it." With the testing comes the provision.

Abraham also received grace. Before he committed this horrible act against his son, God stopped his hand and provided an animal for the sacrifice. Abraham was so grateful he named the place "God provides."

When the writer of Hebrews in the New Testament remembered this story, he made the connection between Abraham, Isaac, and Jesus. By faith, Abraham knew that even if he had to kill Isaac to prove his faith, God was more powerful than death and would give Isaac life again. Jesus endured his own test of faith in the Garden of Gethsemane, where he finally submitted to the will of his Father: "*Not my will, but yours be done.*"⁶ Then the Son of God, like the son of Abraham, was laid on the sacrificial altar of the cross. The difference is, when the Son of God was being sacrificed, God did not stop the hand of the executioner, and the ultimate test of faith took the life of Jesus.

But with the testing comes the provision. Three days later Jesus rose from the dead. God gave his life back to him, as he had done in a figurative way with Isaac. Through that resurrection, God provided a way for us to escape the power of sin, the power of evil, the power of death forever. So Paul writes: "*No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. 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.*"⁷ With the testing comes the provision.

God is God, and we can't always understand everything that happens. That's why faith is such a radical act. But we know that with the testing comes the provision, because one thing we do know about God is that God is good—all the time. God will give us what we need to do what we have to do.

Where is God testing your faith today? I doubt God will ask any of you to sacrifice your children! But I'll bet if you listen closely there is a Voice asking for your attention and for your response today.

Is God asking you to deal with the spiritual emptiness inside you by letting down the barriers to relationship and coming home to him? Is God asking you to accept his grace and forgiveness through Jesus Christ? Is God asking you to have courage, strength, and patience for a particular test you are facing—a physical problem, an emotional burden, a relationship that is troubled? Is

God asking you to make a sacrifice of time, energy, or money to move God's Kingdom forward? Is God asking you to leave your comfort zone and take a new step into ministry, perhaps something that you have never done before?

Where is God testing your faith today, and how will you respond? Will you commit a radical act of faith? If you do, I can promise you: God will provide.

¹ Genesis 22:2.

² Genesis 22:13.

³ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), p. 40.

⁴ Hebrews 11:1.

⁵ Bob Jones, "It's Good to Be King," *World*, July 28, 2001, p. 22.

⁶ Luke 22:42.

⁷ I Corinthians 10:13.