

“What Can We Offer God?”

Genesis 22:1-18

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This story reminds us we're never free from troubles and trials in life. It also shows us God knows how to take care of us in the midst of those struggles. It's like what Jesus told his disciples: "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart, I have overcome the world." (John 16:33) We see that in three movements in the story: God commands, Abraham obeys, and God provides.

First, God commands Abraham to offer Isaac.

Life is hard. It's a lesson all of us learn sooner or later. Like the old song says, "I never promised you a rose garden," God never promises that if we become a Christian everything's going to be easy. There will be times of testing. Our story for today says God tested Abraham. The Hebrew word *nasah*, means to test, to tempt, and to prove—all of them the same word. Interesting, isn't it, to think that from that perspective, when we're tested, we're also tempted to do the wrong thing in response. But there are different actors in the same events. When we face hardships or challenges, the devil is tempting us to entice us to evil, but God is testing us to make us strong.

And tests that come our way show what's really in our hearts. We're not simply an abstract equation, but we *are* what we consistently *do*. If we do good, forgive others, live transparently, then that's what's at our core. And if we hate and resent and manipulate and live to meet our own needs, well, those actions reveal what's inside us, too.

I have a friend who decided to run a marathon a couple years ago. He was out of shape, but he decided he was committed to doing it. He spent twelve months getting ready, and at 65 years, he ran his first marathon and finished.

I can tell you, his twelve months in training were filled with tests. He had to work hard. But the point of the tests was to make him strong, capable of running the 26 miles without "hitting the wall." You only know you can run a marathon when you've been pushed beyond what you think you're capable of.

God didn't test Abraham in order to trick him into sinning. God wanted to grow his faith. And what a test! We might wonder, how could a loving God, a God who does what is right, ask something like sacrificing your child? But the whole point is that God *didn't* ask Abraham to go ahead and kill his child. Child sacrifice was common to Canaan, the land where he sent Abraham, but here the Lord repudiated that practice once and for all.

Second, Abraham trusts God and obeys.

There's a gospel song that says, "Trust and obey, for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey." Abraham learned that lesson. In all of the tests, trials, and temptations, that's the way to happiness.

Abraham had to trust God to do the right thing, even in the shock and grief he must have had to receive these orders from God. "Offer your son," God tells him—"your only son." Every word must have cut him to the heart. He would have been glad to offer a sacrifice of a lamb or a bull. But his son! That's the test. "Take your son. Your only son, Isaac, the one you love." And it wasn't a rash act; Abraham has to go on a three-day trip so he has time to think about it, and has to decide very deliberately to obey.

I can't imagine a trip like that. The love and compassion and delight I have in my children, and going in the knowledge of what was ahead. Maybe no one has ever been tested as Abraham, and not many would respond with that kind of faith. But Abraham knew he followed a God who was just, a Lord who did right. He had already learned to trust God to keep his promises—promises of land, of a legacy, of a family, of being a blessing to the world—and all his promises depended on his promise to give him a son in his old age. Abraham knew God's promises are good and can't be broken. If he asked his neighbors for their advice, he never would have obeyed. But it isn't a matter of human understanding; and so, Abraham got up early and set out on his sad journey.

But faith gives hope, even in heartache. The passage tells us Abraham said to the servants, "Stay here with the donkey." He tells them he and his son are going to worship, and he says "we will come back to you." (Genesis 22:5) He doesn't say, "Wait here till I get back." He says, wait, and "we will come back to you." The writer of the Book of Hebrews in the New Testament, looking back at this event that took place thousands of years before, gives us perspective:

"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." (Hebrews 11:17-19)

Abraham carried what he would need, the wood and fire and knife, and climbed the hill with his son. They climbed the mount of Moriah, and Isaac asked a question: "Father, we have the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Can you imagine!

Finally, the moment came when Abraham had to place his son on the pile of wood, and he had to tell his son, "You are the sacrifice God has provided." He tied his son, took the knife, and lifted his hand for the kill. This is faith, and obedience, it's to trust and obey.

Third, God provides.

Abraham gave an amazing answer to Isaac's question. He said, "God will provide, my son." That's the heart of faith, to hold onto the promise that God will provide.

Abraham's words "God will provide" were truer than he could know. God never meant for Isaac to actually be sacrificed. But one day, in the fullness of time, he would give another sacrifice in the place of Isaac. He would send another son, his only begotten Son. God does provide, and he gave the sacrifice that took our place, Jesus "the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." That's what the Christian tradition called "substitutionary atonement," the fact that God pays the penalty for sin that we owe by substituting a perfect sacrifice in our place.

It's interesting to think that Mount Moriah was probably the hill in today's city of Jerusalem at the very place where the Temple stood. The temple was where the sacrifices took place, year after year, all pointing to the day where God himself in the person of his Son Jesus died on that hill.

Sacrificing our children is not pleasing to God, and it's not something he wants us to do. But he wants us to present them to him. What I mean is, we don't compromise the well-being of someone else, because our own lives are the only thing we can give to God. David says in Psalm 51,

"You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.

"The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart,
O God, you will not despise. (Psalm 51:16-17)

David is saying that offering an animal was only a symbol of something more important on the inside. What God honors and wants from us is a humble heart. Paul touches on that too, when he writes:

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will." (Romans 12:1-2)

What kind of sacrifices does God want? Not dead ones, but living ones. He wants our lives fully given over to him.

Why should we do that? Why should we give our lives to a God we cannot see, one who is sometimes so hard to even imagine, blinded as we are by this world? It's because he is the only thing worthy of our worship, the God who gave everything for us.

One day the Apostle Peter, speaking not far from that very hill where God provided, told the people of Jerusalem,

"Know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. He is 'the stone you builders rejected, which has become the

capstone. 'Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.' (Acts 4:10-12)

The God who calls you to trust and obey like Abraham, the God who wants you as a living sacrifice, is worthy. Don't look for purpose, for meaning, for power, for hope, don't look for salvation in anyone else.

C.S. Lewis understood this, the absolute exclusivity of Christ, and he illustrated it with Aslan, the great lion in the Chronicles of Narnia. In the Silver Chair, he wrote about two schoolchildren, Jill and Eustace, go to a magical country in another world. Jill loses Eustace and is wandering around lost.

Soon she stops and discovers she's terribly thirsty, and she hears the sound of running water. She looks for it, and the story picks up here:

"It grew clearer every moment and, sooner than she expected, she came to an open glade and saw the stream, bright as glass, running across the turf a stone's through away from her. But although the sight of the water made her feel ten times thirstier than before, she didn't rush forward and drink. She stood as still as if she had been turned into stone, with her mouth wide open. And she had a very good reason; just on this side of the stream lay the Lion.

It lay with its head raised and its two fore-paws in front of it like the lions in Trafalgar Square. She knew at once that it had seen her, for its eyes looked straight into hers for a moment and then turned away—as if it knew her quite well and didn't think much of her.

'If I run away, it'll be after me in a moment,' thought Jill. 'And if I go on, I shall run straight into its mouth.' Anyway, she couldn't have moved if she had tried, and she couldn't take her eyes off it. How long this lasted, she could not be sure; it seemed like hours. And the thirst became so bad that she almost felt she would not mind being eaten by the Lion if only she could be sure of getting a mouthful of water first.

'If you're thirsty, you may drink.'

They were the first words she had heard since Scrubb had spoken to her on the edge of the cliff. For a second she stared here and there, wondering who had spoken. The voice said again, 'If you are thirst, come and drink' and of course she remembered what Scrubb had said about animals talking in that other world, and realized that it was the lion speaking. Anyway, she had seen its lips move this time, and the voice was not like a man's. It was deeper, wilder, and stronger; a sort of heavy, golden voice. It did not make her any less frightened than she had been before, but it made her frightened in a rather different way.

'Are you not thirsty?' said the Lion.

'I'm dying of thirst,' said Jill.

'Then drink,' said the Lion.

'May I—could I—would you mind going away while I do?' said Jill.

The Lion answered this only by a look and a very low growl. And as Jill gazed at its motionless bulk, she realized that she might as well have asked the whole mountain to move aside for her convenience.

The delicious ripping noise of the stream was driving her nearly frantic.

'Will you promise not to—do anything to me, if I do come?' said Jill.

'I make no promise,' said the Lion.

Jill was so thirsty now that, without noticing it, she had come a step nearer.

'Do you eat girls?' she said.

'I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms," said the Lion. It didn't say this as if it were boasting, nor as if it were sorry, nor as if it were angry. It just said it.

'I daren't come and drink,' said Jill.

'Then you will die of thirst,' said the Lion.

'Oh dear!' said, Jill, coming another step near. 'I suppose I must go and look for another stream then.'

'There is no other stream,' said the Lion.

What does God want from you? He wants you, your heart, your life. Let me ask you: are you thirsty today? He's the source, and he alone, the one who laid down his life for you.