

God Commands Abraham to Sacrifice His Son
Gen. 22:1-14
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This hasn't happened yet, but whenever they get around to asking me to edit the Bible, I plan on making some substantial changes. I'm not sure who "they" are, but it's got to be some kind of committee, probably uses Robert's Rules of Order. The very first change I would make would be to take this story out. This is exactly the kind of story that gives God a bad name and has kept millions of people from pursuing a life of faith.

Let's say I'm a curious non-believer who wants to know what God is all about, so I start reading the Bible. I like the creation story, although Adam and Eve seem a bit flaky. I make it through the part in Genesis 6 when God wipes out the whole world except for Noah. Everybody has a bad day. But then, just 22 chapters into this book, God asks Abraham to sacrifice his own son. That's a deal-breaker. Why would I want to believe in a God who would do this?

I've not been asked to edit the Bible, and probably won't be any time soon. But there HAVE been people who have had the chance to edit the Bible, the authors and scribes and people who have hand-copied the Bible for centuries. Any one of them could have decided to leave out this story...and yet, here it is. Still in the Bible, confronting us with this image of God which conflicts so drastically, so violently, with who we know God to be. We have enough senseless acts of violence in our world already, don't we? Do we really need to hear a story about God commanding Abraham to commit another one?

OK, let's see if we can make sense of this story, and to do so, we need to put it into context. This is not some random request made by a capricious, blood-thirsty God. This is the only time in scripture where God makes this kind of demand, so there must be some kind of justification for it. We do NOT worship a God who asks people to kill other people, despite what we read in the Old Testament. How do I know? Jesus. Jesus is always a good answer in church. Jesus definitively showed us what God is like, and what we see in Jesus is a God who loves, who offers grace, who sacrifices for others. So, we need to name right now the God in our story today is not representative of the God we know through Jesus.

So, why would God ask Abraham to do this? To get at an answer, we have to go back 22 chapters, when God created the world. As a part of that creative process, God makes Adam and Eve and gives them free will. God didn't want his creation to worship God out of compulsion, but to worship God freely and of their own choosing. Would they do it? God didn't know, so God gives them a little test, telling them not to eat of a certain tree. They take matters into their own hands and fail miserably, and God quickly learns that God's most beloved creation may not always respond well to authority.

Fast-forward a few chapters to when the world has gone to Hades in a handbasket, so God wipes everyone out and starts over with Noah, hoping that he, being a good man, would set things right and stay out of trouble. And yet, not five minutes after departing the ark, Noah gets drunk and curses his own children. Well, that didn't take long. A few chapters later and the descendants of Noah take matters into their own hands, building the Tower of Babel, trying to reach to the heavens so they can be equal to God. So far, God's grand experiment with humanity is blowing up in God's face.

So, God changes the game plan. Rather than work at a cosmic level, God is going to get personal. God picks one particular person – Abraham – and puts all God's eggs in that basket.

God promises Abraham he will be blessed with land and offspring, despite the fact his wife is barren. God is basically betting everything that Abraham will be the one person God can trust to bring about the kind of world God was hoping for from the beginning.

But things get off to a rocky start. First, Abraham and Sarah go to Egypt, and the Pharaoh takes a liking to Sarah. When that happens, Pharaoh would usually kill the husband and take the wife as his own, so Abraham takes matters into his own hands and tells Pharaoh that Sarah is his sister to save his own skin. So much for trusting in God's provision. Then, Sarah takes matters into her own hands and tells Abraham to have a baby with her servant, Hagar, since Sarah can't have kids. So much for trusting in God's provision, part 2. God was hoping Abraham would finally be a human who would trust God, but so far, it's looking like trust is not something humans are capable of.

God stays true to God's promise and Abraham and Sarah eventually have a child, Isaac. We know Abraham was 100 years old when Isaac was born. When the family would go for a walk in the neighborhood, Isaac was in a stroller and Abraham was on a walker. But God had proven to them, against all odds, that God's promises were good, that God could be trusted, that God would do what God said. Now, God needs to know if that's true of Abraham, as well. God has already had God's heart broken by humans several times in the short span of 21 chapters. God needs to know if Abraham's love for God is the most important thing in Abraham's life.

That brings us to our story today. In order to test Abraham's faithfulness, God asks him to let go of the thing most important to him – his son, Isaac. Did God really want Abraham to kill Isaac? Of course not. But God needed to know if Abraham truly trusted God. So this drama plays out, with Abraham taking Isaac to Mt. Moriah and going through with God's command until the very last moment, when the angel intervenes and spares Abraham the anguish of this act.

God's response to Abraham at this moment is the most important part of this whole story. God says through the angel, "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." Did you hear that? "For now I know." Contrary to the belief that God is all-knowing, up to this point, God didn't know whether or not Abraham would be obedient. "For now I know." Abraham has passed the test and God knows Abraham is completely devoted to him.

How about us? Have we passed the test? That's a valid concern. When we go through our own trials, it's easy for us to make God the scapegoat, to make God responsible for our difficulties. Way too often God is given the blame for any obstacle we face. "God must be testing me." And that seems valid based on this story. But it's completely unfair to God for one simple reason: Jesus.

Because of Jesus' death and resurrection, our worthiness in God's eyes is not dependent upon our own trustworthiness, because God knows none of us can live up to Abraham's example. As Paul says in Romans, we all fall short of the glory of God. But God doesn't need to test us, because Jesus has already passed that test. Paul writes about Jesus in Philippians, "And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross." We are reckoned as righteous to God, not because of anything we have done, but because of what Jesus has done for us.

So, I want to encourage you to change your focus about this story. So much energy is expended on trying to understand why God would test Abraham, but that misses the bigger picture of what God ultimately does. Verse 13 says, "And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt

offering instead of his son. So, Abraham called that place “The LORD will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.”

In this story, the God who tests is also the God who provides, and even when the test is no longer needed, thanks to Jesus, God continues providing. Just as God provided a ram to take Isaac’s place, God provided Jesus, the lamb of God, to let us know how much God loves us and wants to be in relationship with us. God knows what it’s like to lose a loved one, which I hope is a small comfort to those of us who’ve had to endure an unimaginable loss in our lives. God knows what that is like.

God knows, because God chose to trust in humanity, which ended up being a much more painful proposition than God ever intended. To trust in someone is to make yourself vulnerable, to open yourself to the pain of being let down. Anyone who’s ever been in a relationship knows that pain. And yet, God doesn’t stop trusting in us. Isn’t that bizarre? Is that any way to run the world, trusting over and over again in people that you know are going to let you down?

It’s the way of love. God loves us so much in spite of our constant disappointments. And all God asks in return is our trust that God will provide, even when God feels a million miles away. So often we take matters into our own hands because we know what’s best. But through Jesus Christ, God says, “Trust in me.” God calls us to lay at the altar anything that is separating us from trusting completely in God. It’s no coincidence that in a few minutes we’ll invite you to come forward and lay your pledge at the foot of the table, in essence sacrificing something precious to you as a sign of trust that God will provide. “Trust in me,” God says. Some days we do, and some days we don’t. And God still provides.

That’s the truth this story holds for us. In the midst of our pain, we are called to remember that we were never promised that a life of faith would not be a struggle. Our trust in God doesn’t exempt us from the difficulties of life, the broken hearts and the dwindling bank accounts and the rivers of tears. Ours is indeed a resurrection hope, but this doesn’t mean we won’t first face our own Gethsemanes, our own trials, our own Good Fridays. And yet, even there, we are not alone. Even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, God is with us, comforting us, consoling us, helping us to see that the cross is not the end of the story.

When it comes to living a life of faith, we don’t get to choose our battles. We don’t get to choose our mountains. All we get to choose is whether or not we trust in God. One writer said, “The character of faith that allows us to be transformed by suffering is not doubt-free certainty, but tenacious trust.” God provides. God provided for Abraham, God provided for Jesus, God provides for us. God provides, not necessarily a way out, but a way through.