

Back in the 1850's, a package had to be delivered from Sacramento to Omaha. Wells Fargo had already hired a stagecoach driver, but they needed somebody to ride shotgun. A guy in a saloon heard them asking people so he volunteered for the job. The two of them are riding along, when an angry Indian brave sees them run over his dog and starts to chase after them. The Indian brave had a late start, so he was far behind the stagecoach. The guy riding shotgun says, “Hey, driver, there's an Indian brave chasing us!” Then the driver says, “Okay, well about how far away is he?” “It's hard to tell! I don't know how to measure that.” “Well, alright. How big is he?” The guy riding shotgun measures with his fingers and tells the driver, “About this big.” “Okay, he's still pretty far behind. We're not in any danger.” Fifteen minutes later the guy riding shotgun says, “Hey, he's getting closer!” “Well how big is he now?” asks the driver. “This big.” “It's no big deal,” says the driver. “He's still pretty far behind.” Then, ten minutes later the guy yells, “Wow, sir! He's a lot bigger now!” The driver is starting to worry a little and asks, “How big is he now?” The other guy responds, “He's huge! My arms aren't long enough to show you!” This freaks out the stagecoach driver, so he tells the man riding shotgun to shoot the Indian brave. The man yells back, “I can't shoot him.” “Why not?” yells the driver. “I've known him since he was this big!”

Many readers want to know how big Isaac is when the story recorded in Genesis 22 takes place. The story begins with the words, “*Some time later...*” so it's hard to know. From the narrative, we do know that Isaac was old enough and big enough to carry the wood for the fire and to inquire of his father, “*Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?*” All Jews, Muslims, and Christians revere this story and they all wrestle with the content and the meaning of this story. Muslims tend to emphasize that God has a right to command whatever God wills, and Abraham must submit. Jews tend to say that Abraham was supposed to argue with God, and that his obedience was, in fact, his failure of the test. Christians tend to point out that God never intended Abraham to go through with it, but that God would, one day, sacrifice HIS only son.

The text of Genesis 22, however, doesn't let us explain any of this in such a tidy and reasonable fashion. The text forces us to confront a God who puts Abraham to the test in the most horrific way imaginable. Then it forces us to wonder if God still tests his people like this today. In the end, the scripture leaves us asking, “What kind of a God is this God of Abraham?”

This story confronts us with a God who tests our faith and who makes demands. The story has an unresolved tension between the God who *tests* and the God who *provides*. We want one or the other, but the story doesn't allow us to choose between the two.

In a symposium on this Scripture, Marva Dawn once pointed out that God's provision is a repeated theme in the text, which makes it clear that God provides good gifts that cannot be explained or even expected. But he also tests. And we are not permitted by this narrative to choose between the God who provides and the God who tests. We need to hold both in tension. Tests are not fun. But they do force us to ask important questions.

John Calvin says about this chapter, “the command of God and the promise of God are in conflict.” Martin Luther says this is a contradiction with which God contradicts himself. The repeated promise of God is that, through Isaac, Abraham's descendants will be as numerous as the sands on the beach and will

be a blessing to all nations. The command of God is that Isaac must be killed without ever having fathered one single child. What follows would be a promise emptied of all its fullness and fruitfulness because there would be no descendants, no future.

What kind of God do you think this is? How are we supposed to live in a covenant relationship with this God? And are we living that way?

Let's walk through this passage of scripture by taking a few deliberate steps. Step 1: God tested Abraham (v. 1). God gives a severe test. God called Abraham, entered into a covenant with him and promised to bless him. A human response is called for—does Abraham have the faith in God that it takes to be God's chosen one? It is a test of faith because Abraham had to decide between the love of God and love of a son. Moreover, how could God ask a thing like killing Isaac through whom God's promise was to be fulfilled: Does Abraham have the faith to believe something so contradictory? If God asked any one of us to kill the one we love the best to prove our faith, could we do it? Can we still believe in God's promise when it seems irrational to do so?

Step 2: Abraham got up and went (v. 3). God gave the command and Abraham "went." His faith passed the test of obedience. Faith is much more than belief, even more than trust; it is ultimately obedience to God's commands. Abraham went to Moriah with his son, some wood, and a fire. The angel of the Lord says in v. 12, "*Now I know that you fear God.*"

Step 3: God himself will provide (vv. 8, 14). Here is an example of the grace of God given to his people, beginning with Abraham. When Abraham passed the test of faith, God provided a ram as a substitute for Isaac. God provided his own sacrifice. He did it once again on Golgotha. He gave his only Son to die on the cross. Jesus was both the sacrifice and the high priest. Jesus passed the test of faith, for he was obedient unto death. Because we repeatedly fail the test, Christ died for us and became a vicarious offering.

Have you ever considered the price of being a Christian? We may have made becoming a Christian too easy in the church today. We will do almost anything to win a convert. We make becoming a Christian as easy and as comfortable as we can afford. We attract new members with air-conditioned buildings, cushioned pews, nurseries for children, fun and fellowship, and some churches even send a bus to pick you up! We often require nothing for membership, not even new members' classes in some churches. We invite, we plead, we beg people to come on in and join the church right now! How different, then, is the message from the Bible about obediently following God and faithfully following God's Son. This story shows the high cost of discipleship.

The price of being a Christian includes at least these three things—1) Love Jesus more than one's own family. 2) Be willing to sacrifice that which is dearest to you for God. 3) Die to oneself and live in Christ.

Professor Tremper Longman, in his very helpful book, *How to Read Genesis*, says, "The plot in the Abraham narrative has reached its appropriate resolution. The promised child has been born! However, such a reaction to the story is premature. God comes with yet a new demand on Abraham's life, one that could hardly have been anticipated. God commands Abraham to take Isaac to Mount Moriah and sacrifice him there—the ultimate sacrifice.

On the surface of it, this command is absurd. The child is the child of promise. To kill Isaac is, seemingly at least, to kill the promise. What is going on here? While Abraham is not told, we, the readers, learn [from verse 1] that this command has a purpose and that is to *test* Abraham's faith (22:1).

As Hebrews later puts it: *By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced 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 even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death. (Hebrews 11:17-19)*

As Abraham lifts the knife over his son Isaac, God stops him. Abraham has passed the test of faith. God knows and we too know that his faith is real. If God didn't stay Abraham's hand, he would have plunged the knife into his son's body. But instead God provides a substitute, a ram whose horns are caught in a bush."

Professor Longman concludes that, "This story speaks to the generations that follow. It encourages God's people through the ages to wait for the fulfillment of divine promises. We think of those after Abraham and Isaac who hoped for the promise of land. We think of our own situation as we have received the promise of Christ's return and a heavenly home. In spite of obstacles and threats to the fulfillment of these promises, God's people are to continue living in faith and obedience."

The central question we must all ask ourselves today is this: Are we living in faith and obedience? Amen.