

ABRAHAM & GOD: COMING TO TRUST EACH OTHER

Genesis 22:1-19

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The sacrifice of Isaac.¹ This is one of the most famous stories in the world. And yet, no story has given readers of the Old Testament more difficulty. Emily Dickinson, always able to give words to our deepest suspicions, concludes from this episode what many already think, that God is an arbitrary tyrant. She recoils in horror, though playfully, suggesting that Abraham's compliance pleased God. "Flattered by Obeisance / Tyranny demurred" [Flattered by Obedience / God—the tyrant—relented], and, when told to his children by Isaac, the "moral" is clear: "with a Mastiff / Manners may prevail" [with a big, bad Dog / Mind your Manners].² In other words, be on your best behavior in the presence of an unpredictable pit bull.

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, unable to stomach this story, has Abraham say to Isaac as father and son climb Moriah: "Stupid boy, do you think I am your father? I am an idolater. Do you think it is God's command? No, it is my desire." Then, later, when Isaac cries out to God, Abraham says to himself softly, "Lord God in heaven, I thank you; it is better that he believes me a monster human than that he should lose faith in you."³

¹While there is much material on this story, I have relied principally upon three sources: Paul Borgman, *Genesis: The Story We Haven't Heard* (InterVarsity Press, 2001), 84-114; Scott Hoezee, "Genesis 22:1-14," in Roger E. Van Harn, ed., *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts*, vol. 1: The Old Testament and Acts (Eerdmans, 2001), 39-42; and Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Preaching Hard Texts of the Old Testament* (Hendrickson, 1998), 17-23.

²Emily Dickinson, poem #1317, in Thomas H. Johnson, ed., *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Little, Brown and Company, 1890, 1960), 571-572.

³Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. H. V. Hong and E. H. Hong (Princeton University, 1983 [The book was first published in Danish in 1843.]), 10-11.

Katie, the wife of Martin Luther, objected to this story. “Martin,” she said, “I don’t believe God would ask anyone to sacrifice his son.” Luther replied, “But Katie, God did.”

Old Testament scholar Ellen Davis remarks⁴ that the Bible takes a great risk putting a story like this one so near the beginning of Scripture. If, naturally enough, you were to begin reading Scripture in Gen 1, you would go a scant twenty-one chapters before encountering this story, replete with its potentially repulsive portrait of a God who commands so horrid a thing as child sacrifice. So why run the risk of offending readers with a story so grim as to tempt a reader to close the Bible and never open it again? Perhaps because we *need* to learn early on something about the nature of God, sin, and the cost of redemption.

Let’s read this story from the twenty-second chapter of Genesis.

¹After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” ²He 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 that I shall show you.” ³So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. ⁴On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. ⁵Then Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.”

⁶Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together.

⁷Isaac said to his father Abraham, “Father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?”

⁸Abraham said, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So the two of them walked on together.

⁹When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. ¹¹But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” ¹²He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear [יָרֵא]—*yere’*] God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” ¹³And 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. ¹⁴So Abraham called that place “The LORD will provide” [יְהוָה יִרְאֶה]—*Yahweh yir’eh*; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.”

⁴In a lecture delivered at the Center of Theological Inquiry, Princeton, New Jersey, July 1999.

¹⁵The angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, ¹⁶and said, “By myself I have sworn, says the LORD: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, ¹⁸and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.” ¹⁹So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham lived at Beer-sheba (Gen 22:1-19, NRSV).

Abraham asked no question in Genesis 22. We ask a bevy of questions about Genesis 22. Abraham walked steadfastly and without stumbling on his way to Mount Moriah. We walk hesitantly, tripping again and again over the puzzling paradoxes we encounter as we try to follow Abraham. The language of Genesis 22 is crisp and direct. We cry out for caveats, for escape hatches, for insertions into the story that will explain God’s request. But the text seems completely unconcerned about the questions we want to raise. The narrator is not unaware of how difficult this test is for Abraham, but far from trying to *soften* God’s command, the narrator has crafted the story so as to *heighten* the very difficulties we find nearly unacceptable. The hammering phrase “your son, your *only* son, whom you *love*, *Isaac*” makes this story heart-breaking to read. And the repeated verbal picture of Abraham and Isaac walking along “together” (vv. 6, 8) reminds me of Sheriff Taylor and his boy Opie walking together in the opening sequence to the old *Andy Griffith Show*: a classic portrait of father-son togetherness. Furthermore, no emotions are described in the text, although the story is full of feeling.

Genesis 22 does *not* suddenly appear from “out of the blue.” No. Verse 1 tells us that God’s command to Abraham comes “some time later” (NIV); a better translation would be “after these things” (NRSV). After *what* things? After all that has gone on earlier in the overall story of Abraham. In “the big picture,” there are several scenes of Abraham’s failure to trust God. At least twice, that we know of, Abraham passed Sarah off as his sister because he feared for their lives despite God’s promise that nothing would happen to them until they had a son. Then there are those occasions when both Abraham and Sarah laughed at God’s promise of a son being born to “senior citizens” like themselves. Due to this doubt, Abraham and Sarah sought a way around God’s promise of the two of them producing a child by having Abraham “help” God’s plan through fathering a child with Hagar. “*After these things*” *God now tests Abraham to see*

whether or not He can trust Abraham to be the means by which blessing will come to all nations. “The test is as real for God as it is for Abraham.”⁵ Abraham’s response is absolutely crucial for God’s purpose for the world. Abraham has been given the gift of Isaac in fulfillment of God’s word. Now the question is, Whom does Abraham trust? Does he trust the *gift* and cling to Isaac? Or does he trust the *Giver*, God, and believe that God knows what He is doing? God takes the risk that Abraham will obey. Abraham takes the risk that God will provide.

God learns that Abraham “fears” (v. 12) – יָרֵא – *yere*’; Abraham learns that God “provides” (v. 14) – יִרְאֶה – *yir’eh*. יָרֵא / יִרְאֶה – ancient ears would not have missed the sound-play – יָרֵא / יִרְאֶה.⁶ *To fear God is to trust that He will provide.*

In Scripture, there is another story of a father called upon to sacrifice his son. Interestingly, 2 Chron 3:1 identifies Moriah with Jerusalem. As Abraham and Isaac walked together to Moriah, so Jesus makes His last journey to Jerusalem in the company of God His Father. The Son Jesus trusts His Father with His life, just as Isaac trusted Abraham. But there is no record of anything they said to one another on the journey—only that brief conversation in the garden, a short distance from the hill of sacrifice: “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from Me” (Matt 26:39). Apparently the answer Jesus received was the same one Abraham implies to Isaac: “The sacrifice must be carried out, My Son.” Like Isaac, Jesus carries the wood up the hill to the place of offering, until He is relieved of the burden by Simon of Cyrene. Like Isaac, Jesus is laid out upon the wood. And as the knife was raised over Isaac’s breast, so the hammers are raised over the nails for Jesus. *But here our stories become very different.* There is no rescue for Jesus—no last-minute voice from heaven to save Him from the awful death—no substitute ram, no rescuing Elijah to take away the pain. The hammers descend, the nails pierce flesh, the cross is reared up against the sky. And Jesus cries out with the voice of a Son who has been abandoned by His Father: “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Matt 27:46).

⁵Terence E. Fretheim, *Genesis*, NIB (Abingdon, 1994), 1:497. Achtemeier, *Hard Texts*, 20: “On what a slender thread God sometimes hangs his plan for this planet!”

⁶When written *yere–yireh*, the word-play is somewhat evident in English.

We tend to resist the notion of an evil so deeply entrenched that it requires even God to go to dangerous and shocking lengths of sacrifice to root it out. Too often we want our God to be tame and predictable, steering away from a God who is utterly surprising, “*a God whose grace always comes with blood on it.*”⁷ In C. S. Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia* one of the children asks Mr. Beaver about Aslan the Lion.

“Is he—quite safe?” . . .

“Safe?” said Mr. Beaver. . . . “Who said anything about safe? ’Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”⁸

God really did mean that promise to Abraham. He truly meant to bring blessing on us all by means of the descendant of Abraham, Jesus Christ. Abraham’s faith in the land of Moriah enabled God’s long history of salvation to proceed, until God’s promise of blessing and salvation was fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

There is a verse in the classic Christian hymn *Trust and Obey*⁹ that states:

But we never can prove
The delights of His love
Until all on the altar we lay;
For the favor He shows,
And the joy He bestows,
Are for those who will trust and obey.

As the song says, *trust and obey for there is no other way* . . .

⁷Hoezee, “Genesis 22:1-14,” 41.

⁸C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (Collier Books, 1950), 75-76.

⁹Lyrics by J. H. Sammis (1877) and music by D. B. Towner (1877).