

Genesis 22:1 Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied.

² Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about..."

⁹ When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied.

¹² "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."

¹³ Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son.

Dear Friends in Christ,

A wedding, especially a Christian wedding, is a joyful time, exceeded in joy perhaps only by the birth of a child. But this very point of joy can become a source of grief. Some couples have difficulty having children. For some, only after many years does God give such a blessing, and then perhaps only a single child, or perhaps through adoption. I think it fair to say that, at least in a way, such a couple treasures their child more than other couples.

And so it was with Abraham and Sarah. They were married for years but had no child. They prayed and worried and got angry with each other—it's all there in the Bible. They hoped and waited, but for decades no child came. Finally, at least 25 years after their wedding, they had one child. I cannot know how they felt. But as the Bible says, "*A longing fulfilled is a tree of life*" (Prov 13:12). That is why they named him Isaac. Isaac means "laughter." It does not need to be mentioned that they loved this child, except that is the key point for our sermon text. Abraham and Sarah loved this child more than life itself.

I – The Impossible Request

In our catechism class we are just finishing the Ten Commandments. In fact, next week they are going to have a test on the Ten Commandments! (Just a reminder kids.) One question you and every Christian should be able to answer is this: What is the First Commandment? "You shall have no other gods." We do well to consider that this is the *first* commandment. God did not throw all ten commandments in a bag and pick this one out first. Not at all. This is the first commandment because it is the most important.

When Martin Luther summed up the Bible's teaching about the first commandment, he said this: "You shall have no other gods. What does this mean? We should fear, love and trust in God above all things." What should we love most in our lives? God. Even more than digital devices and our favorite food? Obviously. Even more than parents or children or a boyfriend or girlfriend? Yes, even more.

Which is easy enough to say, but let's talk about actually doing it.

Maybe 15 or 20 years after Isaac was born, Abraham was a really old man. The biggest worries of having a child were past, those times when Isaac got sick and they worried and Sarah stayed up all night – he survived. As their child was becoming a young man, suddenly God appeared, "***Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering.***" Are you serious?

It raises a lot of questions. This command runs contrary to everything we Christians believe about human life. Many cultures of the ancient world practiced human sacrifice, but God never commanded it. In fact, it was one thing that God most hated about some tribes around the Israelites.

Then why did God tell this Abraham—to do what he roundly condemned? “Explain it, pastor.” I’m not sure I can. From what God said, it is pretty clear what he expected. And Abraham understood it just like it sounds. The word for “burnt offering” is quite clear. The point of the burnt offering was that the entire animal was completely burned up as a sign of a believer completely dedicating himself to God. In this burnt offering, God wanted Abraham to show his complete dedication to God.

The one thing I *can* say is that God knew that he could and would keep the child from harm. From the almighty God’s perspective, there was a 0% chance that harm would come to Isaac. While we may have unanswered questions, this is a point to keep in mind when we consider God’s request: God knew all along that the child would not be harmed.

But why would God ask such a thing of Abraham? Here again, answers are not found. But as the story unfolds we see clearly that God wanted Abraham to prove something. He wanted Abraham to prove that he loved God more than anything else.

But if that is true, couldn’t God just look in Abraham’s heart and know? Why a test? Don’t we sometimes say, “I really don’t know what I would do in his shoes!” Many movies are built around these situations. The hero of the story has a choice to make. He can save himself, or he can save everyone else. In many movies the hero will give up his life to save the others. We are moved to tears, we approve. But in our own hearts most of us wonder, “I don’t really know what I would do in his shoes. I might buckle at just the crucial moment and selfishly save myself.” Only by putting the decision in front of us, and forcing us to act – only then do we find out what really is in the bottom of our hearts.

That is exactly what is going on between God and Abraham. Abraham could pray to God and pledge himself to God daily. But the only way for Abraham’s love to be reality is to be put in position where he had to act on that love. For all the unanswered questions, the thing that is clear is that God is asking Abraham to wrestle with what he holds dear (his son), and to put God in first place.

By the way, this isn’t as far fetched as it may seem. God does ask us to do things that are culturally unacceptable, or which put the things we hold dear in second place. On the one side you have the things you most enjoy about life, the convictions you hold most dear. On the other side is God. Which one is in first place? Would you be willing to sacrifice something to keep God in first place?

II – The Attempted Sacrifice

God’s test was to see if Abraham would put him in first place – which meant that Isaac would have to be in second. And for Isaac to be truly in second, he would have to literally be laid on the altar.

The Bible reading gives us almost no indication of how Abraham felt about this whole thing. We only see Abraham going through the steps to offer his son on the altar. We can’t read the emotion in his face. The only emotion we detect in the entire reading is when God appeared to Abraham. God said, “**Take your son, whom you love.**” But those few words there tell me all I need to know about Abraham.

Abraham woke that morning, and had to think, sick to his stomach, “Do I really need to do this? Do I need to sacrifice my son?” He called the servants. He told them to cut the firewood, to gather the supplies, to load the donkeys. He called Isaac, who by every indication was probably 16-20 years of age. Do you think he looked Isaac in the eye? Abraham bid farewell to Sarah. I doubt he told her, but I’ll bet she could tell something was not right in her husband of 50 years or more. For two evenings the four-man expedition set up camp, and each morning they broke camp, Abraham waiting those three days for God to finally say, “This is the place.” It was a journey Abraham hoped would never reach its end. And then it did and he constructed the altar, arranged the wood, tied his son, grasped the knife. Abraham’s resolve could have broken at any step. He could have burst out, “This is madness. I will do anything you want God, but please not my son!” Or just as likely say, “Who needs a God who tells me

to sacrifice my son?!” Yet he never falters.

Is God in first place in your life? God’s order to Abraham seemed ridiculous, but he would do what God required. What parts of God’s ways seem ridiculous to you? Is it the fourth commandment that we should respect those in authority even when they seem unworthy? That is what God wants. Everybody uses the name of God in meaningless ways. If everyone else talks that way, why shouldn’t I? I offend no one. Cleaning up my language would get myself labelled as some sort of Christian extremist. It is accepted as the norm, even in many parts of Christianity that intimate relations before marriage are okay. But when God forbids all of that, are you willing to put God in first place and obey him even at the cost of a relationship? This is what was going on with Abraham. God was checking to see if Abraham did love him more than anyone or anything else.

Jesus more than once said, *“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.”* (Lk 9:23). The first commandment says that we should hold God more dear than all things, even life itself. And therefore, as world events teach us even now, a Christian may be required to choose God over life.

Let us pause, however, at this point. What does it mean to sacrifice something for our Savior? Does it mean, “Kill it. Get rid of it.”? Remember the outcome of this story. ***“[Abraham] reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven... ‘Do not lay a hand on the boy. Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son’”*** (9-12). Abraham did not, in fact, make a sacrifice of Isaac. God refused to let Abraham go there. God allowed him to keep Isaac, to later see him married and with children.

And so it is that God *usually* does not ask us to abandon what we enjoy, as long as it is clearly in second place. We can use God’s name, but in ways which glorify him. We are allowed dissent of authority and difference of opinion, but with obedience and respect. God’s gift of intimacy is a blessing, within God’s described limits of marriage. And children, yes children, are a most dear blessing from God to be loved and cared for and nurtured, simply that they not take God’s first place in our lives.

III – The Solution

One last thing must be pointed out. In this story we see a picture of the coming Savior. Did you see it? The picture is not so much in a person but in an animal. After God had stayed Abraham’s hand, ***“Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son”*** (13).

This is the Bible’s first clear picture of a sacrifice of substitution. Substitution forms the basis of the entire Old and New Testament theology. That ram caught in the thicket, which Abraham then offered in place of his son, that animal is a sign. It is a sign of the one who would come, not as a substitute for a single person, but for the entire world. Jesus died for us who were supposed to die for all those times that we did not put God first in our lives.

May that Lamb of God be praised as we now journey to the home of our heavenly father. Amen.