

“My Greatest Test”
Genesis 22
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My name is Abraham and I’m here to tell you a story.
This is the story of the most difficult time in my life.

Before I do that however, I’d like to ask you a question.
What is the most difficult thing you have ever done?

When I say “difficult” I don’t necessarily mean physically difficult like lifting an impossibly heavy object off an injured friend’s leg.

When I say “difficult” I mean emotionally the hardest thing you have ever done.

- Was it saying “no” to marriage, because the other person wasn’t a believer?
- Was it giving the final order to stop the hospital life-support of a loved one?
- Was it saying “good bye” to your children as they moved halfway around the world?
- Was it walking away from the cemetery after you buried your spouse of 45 years?
- Was it watching a child walk away from God and being unable to do anything about it?
- Was it saying “yes” to God when he asked you to become a missionary, take a different job, or move to a new city?

What is the most difficult thing you have ever done?

I wish I had the time to stop and ask each one of you to think and answer.

Because I would also like to ask you, “What did you learn through that experience?”

I have another question, especially for those who couldn’t think of a “most difficult” experience.

“What is the most difficult thing you will do in the future?”

If it hasn't already happened, there is coming a time when my experience will be yours.

Oh, the circumstances will undoubtedly be different, but the difficulty will surely be as great and the feelings every bit as intense.

And in that "most difficult" time, if you are a believer in God, you too will be faced with what I was faced with – do I trust God.

I hope you will have your own story in mind as I tell you my story of the most difficult time in my life.

It all began at probably one of the happiest times in my life.

I had everything a man could want – a relationship with God, a faithful wife, a healthy growing son, and a comfortable living.

Forty years earlier God came to me and told me to leave my father's family and move to a land unknown to me – a land that God would show me.

God also promised that from me would come a large extended family and the whole world would be blessed because of my family and me.

Those were "heady", exciting thoughts.

They even stretched my imagination because my wife was unable to have children.

So this was a huge step for me to take.

In those days transportation and communication weren't what they are today.

But I trusted God and I took Sarah, my wife, and my nephew, Lot, and we headed out into the unknown.

The next twenty-five years were a roller-coaster existence.

I say "roller-coaster" because of the ups and downs.

The "downs" were pretty severe.

There was the time I moved to Egypt and lied to the King and almost lost everything.

There was the time I saw Sodom and Gomorrah destroyed by fire from God and was left wondering for a time if my nephew Lot and his family made it out alive.

Then there was the time that Sarah and I stopped believing God that he would give us a family in his timing and we took matters into our own hands.

I had a child by Sarah's servant girl, Hagar.

What a spiritual failure I was and what a mess that created.

But probably the lowest point up until the story I'm about to tell you, is the time when Sarah demanded that my son Ishmael, the child born to Hagar, be sent away – probably to die.

Worse yet, God told me to do what Sarah said.

I'll never forget that day I watched him and his mother walk out into the desert with only enough to sustain them for a few days.

Those were some of the "down's but there were also "ups".

God blessed us materially – we became quite wealthy.

I remember the time I and my men chased after some soldiers who had kidnapped my nephew Lot – we caught up to them and even though we were outnumbered, we defeated them and rescued Lot and all those who were with him.

I was something of a hero after that.

And all during these twenty-five years God kept coming to me to restate his promise – I would become the father of a great nation, with thousands of descendants.

And each time I would wonder how God was going to do this since my wife couldn't have children.

Finally, twenty-four years into this experience God came to me and said very specifically that Sarah would have a son the next year.

Now, I need you to know that by that time I was 99 years old and Sarah was 89.

And clearly the highpoint of our lives was when, sure enough, just as God had promised, a year later, Sarah gave birth to a bouncing baby boy.

We called him Isaac.

He was the son God had promised.

We had waited twenty-five years and though we had failed often, God was faithful.

As I said earlier, except for sending my son Ishmael away, the next 15 years were the happiest days of my life.

Everything we had dreamed about for twenty-five years was now coming to pass.

We were in the land God had promised.

We were prospering.

We had a healthy son who would be our future and God said the future of the world.

That's what makes what happened next incomprehensible.

One day God called out my name, "Abraham!"

I didn't hear directly from God many times, but believe me I knew when it was God.

And so I responded like a servant saying, "Here I am" – ready to listen and do what you say, God.

The words that came next from God were the best and the worst I had ever heard.

God started out by saying what was truly on my heart.

He described my relationship to Isaac.

He said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love..."

God was right, truly Isaac was MY son.

This son had come the right way, by my wife Sarah.

And just as truly he was my ONLY son.

That reminder was both bitter and sweet.

Bitter because it reminded me that Ishmael was gone.

But sweet in that this was truly my ONLY child.

His name was ISAAC because God told me to name him that and it was a constant reminder that this son was the son of promise – all of my future, and God said, the future of the world, hung on him.

And God was surely right when he said, the son “WHOM YOU LOVE”, for I couldn’t possibly love a child more than I loved Isaac.

Do you know what I mean? For fifteen years I had played with him, protected him, taught him, and enjoyed him – what a blessing of God in my life.

But the words God spoke that day were also the worst I had ever heard.

This was what he 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.”

I was stunned!

In one command I was asked to take the two most powerful forces in my life and pit them against each other.

On the one side was my love for my son.

On the other, was my commitment to obey God.

You might say, “God would never tell you to do that!”

But I’m here to say, he did!

You have to understand, that as barbaric as it sounds to you, it was not uncommon in my day for other religions to sacrifice children in their worship.

Furthermore God himself later said that the firstborn of every family is dedicated to the Lord – given to God to do with as he purposes.

And in Moses’ day they would offer an animal sacrifice to buy back the life of the firstborn child.

My experience in the culture around me, and the probability that God meant it, are what made his words believable and so astounding.

Once before I had been asked to leave what was dearest to me and trust God with the future.

But this time it was different – this was my son, my only son, whom I loved.

I cannot recall with any certainty what was going through my mind but I knew the command was clear and the cost was impossibly high.

Early the next morning I got up and saddled a donkey. Then I called two of my servants to come with us.

I don't even remember what I told them we were doing.

I do know that I was in turmoil.

I saddled the donkey and got ready to go even before I cut the wood to use in the sacrifice.

I was confused.

Was I hoping God would change his mind?

Was I wondering about whether I could go through with it?

Was I wondering what kind of God would ask such a thing?

Or was I just crushed with grief as I anticipated what was ahead?

If you wonder how I could have taken the command seriously enough to even start off the next morning, you have to remember the kind of relationship I had with God.

He had never failed me.

He had more than once rescued me.

He had made promises that absolutely came true.

The God who made the command was the God who had become my friend.

We set out – donkey with wood, two servants, my son Isaac and me.

Two days we traveled, two nights we slept or I tried to, and all the time I am struggling with these two competing values in my life – my love for my son and my commitment to obey my God.

They were the longest days of my life.

I don't know why God made me walk all that time to get to the place.

Did he want me to have plenty of time to consider what I was doing?

Did he want to torture me over time, with the immensity of this command?

Did he want to drive me to the very end of myself?

Did he want to see not an impulsive decision but a considered one?

Would I obey God, would I trust him?

On the third day, I looked up and saw the place in the distance.

I knew that was the place where the sacrifice would be made.

All of the sudden what was in the future was imminent, what was nightmare-like was all too real.

Those last miles were torturous.

We finally got to a place where I wanted the servants and donkey to wait and just Isaac and I would go on.

I told them we were going to worship but I also told them “we” (notice the “we”), we would come back to them.

As I think back on that, I don’t know why I said that.

Was I just telling a little lie to keep Isaac in the dark?

Was I planning to disobey God and not sacrifice my son?

Was I expecting God to change his mind or do a miracle?

I put the wood from the donkey on Isaac and I took the fire pot and the knife and we left the servants as we made the final ascent to the top of the mountain.

Very little talking had gone on while we traveled those two days.

And now we were completely silent.

As we walked side by side, my heart grew even heavier.

Finally Isaac broke the deathly silence.

He said, “Father?”

And I said to him just as I had said to God, “Here I am my son.”

Then he asked the question that must have been obvious for days, but a question that broke my heart: “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”

What do I say?

Do I tell this fifteen-year-old that he is about to die?
 Doesn't he already know something is unusual?
 Or does he simply trust me?

I think this is when it happened – when I turned the corner in my struggle with God.

Before I could answer Isaac's question, I knew I had to decide.
 I had to decide if I truly trusted God.

I want to tell you what happened in my mind at that point.

It was a New Testament writer, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who said it most succinctly:

Hebrews 11:17-19

"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 the dead."

I thought, "God is not a liar. He cannot be mistaken.
 He told me, beyond question, that I would have a son, and there that son is, walking beside me.

God has said that this son would be the one through whom he would fulfill all of his promises.

Therefore this son must live or God would be a liar.

And yet God commands that this son be put to death.

Here, humanly speaking, is a contradiction.

But there is no contradiction in God.
That is a foundational fact.

There is power in God; there is wisdom in God;
 there is majesty and glory in God; but there is no contradiction in God.

What then is to be done with God's command to sacrifice my son?

Since there is no contradiction in god, there is only one answer that my mind can fathom.

God is going to perform a miracle and raise Isaac from the dead.

Doubt may say that is foolish, because until then there had never been a resurrection in the history of the world.

That doesn't make any difference.

A resurrection is compatible with the nature of God but a contradiction isn't.

God is life and the author of life.

It would be a small matter for the God who created the universe, including human beings, to bring life back into a dead body.

So the one clear, logical conclusion is that God can do whatever it takes to keep his promises – even raising Isaac from the dead if that is necessary. (paraphrased from Barnhouse in Boice 687)

In that moment I knew what my action would be – I would obey God.

Why? Because I trusted God.

I knew that no matter how painful the process, no matter how deep the valley, no matter how high the cost, God would be faithful to his promises.

Many years later Jeremiah would say it this way,
 Jeremiah 29:11 "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

I did not know what God would do, but I knew that God would be faithful to his word.

And so I said to my son, my only son, Isaac, whom I loved,
 "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering."

I didn't know what shape that would take but I knew my God.

Again we walked on in silence.

And though my mind was settled, my heart still ached within me.

We finally got to the exact place where God told me to build the altar and I did.

And then I arranged the wood on the altar.

All this time, Isaac is watching and waiting.

I had said God would provide the lamb.

Then unbelievable as it sounds, my strong, lively 15 year-old son allowed me to bind him with rope and lay him on top of the wood on the altar.

His trust of me was of the same kind as my trust of my heavenly Father.

I also knew then that the test of true faith is obedience.

I could say I trust but until I put it into action, they were only words.

With my mind fixed on God and my heart in my throat, I reached out my hand and took the knife to slay my son.

If ever there was a moment that stood still in time, that was it.

All of the doubts rushed back into my head once again.

All of the reasons why I could not go through with this came again.

But with them also came a renewed conviction that my God is faithful.

And as I swung the knife downward, I spiritually and mentally collapsed into the arms of God.

“God, he is yours. Take care of my son, God!”

What has God asked you to do that you are not certain you can trust him for?

Has God prodded you a dozen times to confess your need for him and turn your life over to him – ask his forgiveness and follow Christ whatever it may mean?

But you aren't sure you trust God – you fear that what he will ask you to give up is greater than anything you'll get.

Has God asked you to change the way you earn or spend your money or how you use your time?

But you aren't certain that God's plan for your life is better than your plan for your life? You don't know if you can trust him?

Has God asked you to reorient your entire life to make it your life's aim to love him, serve him, and give yourself to expanding his kingdom?

But you have given your life to pursue other goals, your goals and you don't trust him.

What is it for you?

Has God for years been prodding you about your life, your goals, your money, your giving, your relationships, your commitment to him, AND you have been ducking him because you aren't convinced he knows what he's talking about or has your best interests in mind?

God is back to you today saying, "Trust me, I love you!"

As I said, with my mind fixed on God and my heart in my throat, I raised the knife and started downward with it.

At that very second, not one second earlier, the angel of the LORD called out to me with an urgency, "Abraham, Abraham!"

My arm could not have stopped any more suddenly if someone had grabbed it – and I could not have been more willing to stop it.

And I responded as I had twice earlier – "Here I am!"
What do you want me to do?

And I heard the sweetest words ever spoken, "Do not lay a hand on the boy, do not do anything to him."

The relief that swept over me is indescribable.

And then God told me what this whole experience was about.

He said, "Now I know that you fear God because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."

When Moses told the story years later, he told his readers right at the beginning what this experience was all about when he wrote, "Sometime later God tested Abraham."

Of course I didn't know it at the time.

Now remember the difference between a test and a temptation.

A temptation is to entice us to fail – God doesn't tempt.

A test is to push us to greater trust – God tests us.

God wanted to take me to the next level of trust.

To a trust not in what would happen, but to a trust solely in him.

He wanted to take me to that level where trusting him would defy human logic, common sense, and would even force me to choose trusting him over my love for my son.

Jesus said it this way, Luke 14:26-27 "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple."

There is a time coming in your life, if you haven't already experienced it, when all you will have is God's word (humanly unverifiable).

And you will be asked to trust him and him alone.

In fact that is the situation, every minute of every day.

Who do we trust most?

I must tell you how the story ended.

No sooner did God tell me to stop then I looked up and saw a ram caught by its horns in a thick bush.

I quickly took hold of it and sacrificed it on the altar in place of my son.

Do you remember the words I said in faith to my son Isaac as we were walking up the mountain?

How God would provide?

I was so overcome with joy that I named the mountain by that name – “Jehovah Jireh” which translated means “the Lord will provide”.

I learned a huge lesson that day.

God can be trusted in any and every situation.

What God calls us to, he will provide.

His plans are for our good even if the way seems evil.

God saw my obedience as evidence of my faith – real faith, raw faith, faith based ultimately on God’s word.

Faith in the unseeable, faith in God even in the face of the unreasonable.

God was recreating a man who would live in humble dependence on him.

God was taking out of me all the rebellion, all the attitude of self-sufficiency and self-service that is in every person and recreating a man who would trust God in every circumstance of life - a man who would follow God even blindly.

What's the hardest thing you have ever done or ever will do?

Will you trust God?

He is faithful.