

The Lord Will See To It

Genesis 22:1-14

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ October 13, 2019 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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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 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”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.” (Genesis 22:1-14, NRSV)

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In his book *Under the Banner of Heaven*, John Krakauer opens with the true but chilling story of a Utah man who killed his sister-in-law and 15-month-old niece because, as he put it later, God told him to. In fact, he claimed God gave him hand written orders to carry out the “sacrifice”. After his arrest he testified, “You would think I have committed a crime of homicide, but I have not...I was doing the will of God, which is not a crime.” He also testified that as he was about to kill his baby niece with a ten inch boning knife, he told her, “I’m not sure what this is about, but apparently, it’s God’s will that you leave this world; perhaps we can talk about it later.” He later described his actions this way: “It was like someone had taken me by the hand that day and led me comfortably through everything that happened...You don’t want to offend God by refusing to do his work.”¹

A story like that absolutely horrifies any sensible human being. How could any person get to the place where they could conceive that God would command such a thing? And yet, what did we just read in the pages of scripture? God commands a man to take his son and sacrifice him in a similar way for reasons that aren’t made explicitly clear. How could this be in the Bible? And yet it is. This is God’s Word, and not only that, but a *historical account* in God’s Word of something that actually happened, something God actually commanded.

This is where our view of scripture is tested. You see, it’s very popular these days to cherry-pick the parts of the Bible we like and accept them, and then simply set aside the parts we don’t like. I’ve watched people in the church do this all the time. But when we do this we betray the fact that we actually don’t believe scripture is God’s Word and don’t respect its authority as such. Instead, we treat the Bible like our own personal echo chamber, embraced when it affirms what we already believe and set aside when it doesn’t. Then the last thing we let it do is inform, even challenge, what we believe. We must not do this. What we read *here* is

¹ John Krakauer, *Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith* (New York: Anchor, 2004), xx-xxi. Cited in an online article by Matthew Rowley, “Irrational Violence? Reconsidering the Logic of Obedience in Genesis 22”, <http://themelios.thegospelcoalition.org/article/pastoral-pensees-irrational-violence-reconsidering-the-logic-of-obedience>

God's Word, full of truth and authority, and so we must wrestle with what God is teaching and doing here.

And yet the question remains: how could this be? How could a loving and good God command such a thing of his servant Abraham? Well, to get at the answer we need to begin by remembering the context. This is not Abraham's first encounter with God. In fact, by this point Abraham has had a long history of experiencing God's blessing and faithfulness in his life. God first appeared to him out of the blue and chose him to be blessed, the father of a blessed nation through which God would one day bless all nations.² God protected him from harm in Egypt by making a miraculous plague fall upon Pharaoh and his house.³ God made personal visits to Abraham on numerous occasions, sometimes in dreams or visions.⁴ Abraham was ultimately validated by God as a prophet.⁵ And, of course, after decades of being unable to conceive a child, God miraculously blessed Abraham and his wife Sarah in their very old age with a child, their first child, their son Isaac.⁶

Here's the point. By the time of this terribly difficult request, God has established an extensive track record of faithfulness and blessing in Abraham's life. Abraham had come to trust God because God had always been good and gracious and generous towards him. Furthermore, the request that God made of Abraham, though completely foreign and abhorrent to our 21st century Western sensibilities, would not have been received that way by Abraham. In the ancient Near East, a land that was filled with pagan religions, the firstborn child was often given in sacrifice as a way for a family to atone for their sins before their gods. Child sacrifice was quite common, something the gods asked of people all the time. So perhaps this God of Abraham is no different than the other gods. None of this quite makes God's command conceivable from our perspective, but at least we may be able to better understand how it was that Abraham resolved to obey it.

But why? We're still left with that question. *Why* would God command such a thing of Abraham, especially after such a long history of such goodness and blessing towards Abraham? Isaac, in fact, was the greatest blessing of all, the very one through which all the other blessings were to flow. Why take him away now? The answer may lie in the reality that God, unlike all the other gods worshiped by pagan nations of that day, demanded to be worshipped exclusively and

above all else. The most important verse in the entire Old Testament, Deuteronomy 6:4, declares, "**Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.**" There is no other God but the Lord.

Here's what that means. God is the ultimate source of all human identity; it is through the Lord that we understand who we are. God is the ultimate source of all human security; every good gift we possess has come to us from his hand. And God is the ultimate source of all human meaning; through his call on our lives we discover our very purpose for living, which is to love like he loves. This means that no other thing or person is to challenge the Lord for this place of supremacy in the heart of human being.

When something or someone else does challenge that rightful place, that thing or person becomes an idol. As Romans 1 puts it, this happens when we worship and serve created things rather than the Creator.⁷ God hates idols because God loves people and idols make promises to people, along the lines of identity, security and meaning, that idols can never keep. You don't want your child or grandchild to base their life on something that will ultimately fail them and do them great harm, right? Neither does God. And so in this particular case I believe that God sensed that Isaac, in Abraham's heart, was not only a delight but was perilously close to becoming an idol, the imagined source of his security, identity and meaning in life. Abraham's story, by the way, is our story. This propensity towards the worship of idols is the human condition. You and I both are often perilously close to placing some thing or another on the throne in our hearts. That means we should pay special attention to what happens here.

Because of his deep and enduring love for his people, God cannot simply sit by and watch himself be replaced by impotent idols. Instead, God will bring a test. That's what we are told is happening here; verse 1 tells us that God 'tested' Abraham. That's Bible-speak meaning that the person in question is about to face some difficulty through which he or she will ultimately benefit. In this sense, testing is not cruel. Parents, coaches, teachers, employers, at least if they are doing their job, are always putting difficult tests before their subordinates to help stretch them in healthy ways.

God is no different when it comes to our misplaced devotion. In fact, the tests he gives us will take aim at the idol itself. Remember the rich young ruler Jesus met one day?⁸ Jesus knew he worshipped material

² See Genesis 12:1-3

³ See Genesis 12:10-20

⁴ See Genesis 13:14-18, Genesis 14, Genesis 18.

⁵ See Genesis 20:1-7, 17-18

⁶ See Genesis 17:15-19; 18:10-14; 21:1-8

⁷ Romans 1:25: "...they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen."

⁸ Mark 10:17-27

wealth above God. So Jesus tested him and asked him to give away all his possessions to the poor. Sadly, he failed the test. Then there was the Samaritan woman by the well.⁹ Jesus knew she was worshipping the love of a man, or many men, ahead of God. So he lovingly exposed her idol. She passed the test and ultimately placed her faith in Jesus. Here now is Abraham. He is in danger that imagining that his identity, security and meaning in life are all wrapped up in his son, something that happens all the time with parents and their kids. Children, rather than God, become the center of our lives. If they were taken away we believe we would be left with nothing. So God brings Abraham a test.

It's probably good for you to know that God will do with you what he did with Abraham. Sooner or later he will test your devotion. I'm sure he already has. You see, he knows your heart, better than you know your heart. He knows what person or thing you are tempted to look to as the ultimate source of identity, security and meaning in life. For you it might be comfort or status. Might be your reputation. Might be your material wealth. Might be your career or your accomplishments. Like Abraham, it might be some person in your life. Most of these are good things, of course, but they are good things which we make into ultimate things. As writer Tim Keller puts it, an idol is "anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give."¹⁰ In this sense, an idol will always break your heart because no created thing can bear the freight of your deepest hopes or the weight of your soul's longings.¹¹

It's not a question of *if* God will test your true devotion but *when*. And when he does your idol, or the idol you are perilously close to worshipping, will be revealed. But the opportunity will also then appear for you to properly reorder the affections of your heart by taking some tangible step of faith towards God. Specifically, when God tests you it will be good if your response to God is similar to Abraham's response: "Here I am. I'm ready. I'm listening. What do you need me to do?" These cannot simply be empty words, of course. Action must follow. It's easy to offer words of devotion to God. We sing them and pray them and testify them in worship all the time. But words without works are dead words.¹² Others might be fooled. You might even fool yourself. But God will not be fooled. So action is required.

We see this very thing play out with Abraham. God does not just come and ask Abraham, "Do I still have your ultimate devotion or has that shifted to your son, Isaac?" No, God requires action: "**Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go the mountain of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering...**" Amazingly, Abraham goes. The *very next morning* he goes. But let's not pretend that this was easy for Abraham. A.W. Tozer suggest that perhaps there was not afterwards such a mortal pain to visit a human soul until the garden at Gethsemane where Jesus sweat blood the night before his death. For three days the journey to Moriah must have been made in agonizing silence.

Commentator Walter Brueggemann identifies the crux of the agony here.¹³ On one hand, there is God's promise, God's sacred covenant. God told Abraham that it was to be through Isaac that he would raise up and bless a great nation which would one day, in turn, become a blessing to all other nations. And as long as Abraham had known God, God had never broken a promise. On the other hand, there is the test. God has just now made a command that seems to contradict his promise, which of course is God's prerogative. If God is God then God is sovereign. He is not to be questioned. He is master, not butler. He can do what he pleases and who can tell him otherwise? Do you see this tension between promise and test?

If you think about it, you face this tension all the time if you are somebody who is seeking to follow Jesus. God promises life but then allows death to come. God promises joy but then can leaves us in seasons of profound grief. God promises abundance but then we experience scarcity. God promises us companionship but we can at times feel so alone. And yes, we acknowledge that God has every right to take life, and allow grief, and leave us with next to nothing, and let us alone. You're God; you can do what you want. But what about your promises! Didn't you promise something different? On the one hand God is graciously faithful; on the other hand God is God and can do what he wants. Who can understand this? Martin Luther once said that no human philosophy or reason can comprehend how these two things hold together.¹⁴ How then could Abraham have even begun to understand how the test was possible in light of the promise?

And yet he obeyed. The text tells us – and this part always strikes me – that when they arrived at the mountain he told the young men who were with him,

⁹ John 4:1-42

¹⁰ Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods* (Riverhead Books, 2009), xix.

¹¹ For extended teaching on idols from Tim Keller watch <https://www.kevinhalloran.net/tim-kellers-definition-of-idolatry/>

¹² See James 2:14-26

¹³ Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation Commentary: Genesis* (John Knox Press, 1982), 185-194.

¹⁴ Cited by Brueggemann, 189.

“Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you.” That’s what he’s doing? He’s going to worship! Isn’t this just a cover up for what he’s really going to do? I don’t think so. I think he says what he means and means what he says. As I talked about last week, worship happens anytime in life when we acknowledge that it is God alone who is the center and source of all identity, security and meaning in life. So when we offer anything, even the most ordinary moment or possession, back to God, its rightful owner, we worship God for who God truly is. Abraham is offering the most precious thing in life, his dear son Isaac, back to God in an act that made clear that nothing else, even his only beloved son, would sit on the throne of his heart. Though he did not understand the test, he was trusting the promise.

Do remember that Jesus once told his disciples: **“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”**¹⁵ Jesus was not telling us that we also need to be physically crucified as he was crucified. But he is talking about a death of sorts, specifically about dying to the things in our life that we have been tempted to place on the thrones of our hearts. He’s talking about absolute renunciation which is so often extraordinarily painful. In fact, it’s always painful to some degree to take the most precious thing in your life and give it back to God in an act that makes clear that whether God allows you to possess that gift in the days to come or not, you will not falter in your devotion to God. You will not trust the gift but the giver of the gift, the one who blesses over the blessing itself.

Listen closely to me. If you are truly wanting to follow Jesus, to reorder your entire life around him as Lord, your career must be dead to you. Your future and your dreams, dead to you. Your possessions, dead to you. Your priorities and plans, dead to you. Your health and the length of your days on this earth, dead to you. Your reputation and your status in this world, dead to you. Your success in life, dead to you. Even your children, your partner, your loved ones, dead to you. You must release all these back to God, trusting him whether or not he allows you to continue to enjoy these blessings or not. Because any one of them, as good as they are, if they improperly placed on the throne of the your heart, will eventually fail you and break your heart.

This is exactly what God was asking Abraham. Abraham, do you believe Isaac is the source of your identity, security and meaning or do you believe I alone am the source? And how did Abraham answer?

“When 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. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.” I do not believe that Abraham knew what was coming next. Had he known then he would not have needed faith. He did not know. He simply held on to the promise in the midst of the test. He did not understand the Lord’s plan, but he trusted the Lord and so followed the plan.

What happens next to Abraham is what happens to any person who similarly picks up his or her cross and dies to themselves. God provides. God not only spares the life of Isaac but provides a ram in the nearby thicket as a substitute offering. In response, Abraham is so overwhelmed by the surprising way that God kept his promise he actually names the place “The Lord will provide.” That’s *Jehovah Jireh* in the original Hebrew, and it literally means “The Lord will see to it.”

You see, in our world there is deep conflict between what God says is right and what the world teaches us is right. The world insists that material wealth will satisfy. The world tells us to avoid, even hate, our enemies and form our own tribe of people who think like we think. We are told that truth is relative; believe what you want to believe as long as you believe it sincerely. The message of the world is that we should live with ourselves at the center. Follow your own path. Trust your instincts. You be you.

All this means that the person who trusts in Jesus must be willing to die to these things of the world and believe that in that dying somehow God will still provide, somehow see to it. Not only that, as you pursue him, God may ask you to do something quite hard. Some test *will* come. Quit this job and follow this new path. Honor that commitment you made, to that marriage, to that church, to that calling. Give up that activity that is sucking all your time and energy. Go be with those people you don’t much like. Learn to love them. Give that thing away; somebody needs it more than you do. In all these things there is a sacrifice that, if made, is a death of sorts. But it is also worship. Without understanding how, we are trusting that in the end the Lord will see to it. We may be left with nothing, but if we still have Christ we are left with everything!

In *The Pursuit of God*, A.W. Tozer declares: “Everything is safe which we commit to [God], and nothing is really safe which is not committed.” This was not his idea. Jesus said it first: **“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things**

¹⁵ Matthew 16:24 (NRSV)

will be given to you as well.”¹⁶ We can’t play games with God on this, but once we come to the place where we sincerely trust Jesus enough to be willing to sacrifice all other things for his sake, not just with our words but, if he asks, with our actions, then we will find that in the end God indeed will see to it. He will provide, in ways far beyond what we might ever imagine.

The forsaking, of course, will not be easy. It often will be agonizing to let go of something you have made into an idol. Abraham certainly agonized. But in the end we, like him, will discover that what we have given up could never have been kept forever anyway and that what we will receive in the end will be something which we can never lose.

You see, there was not just a ram in a thicket who became the substitute for Isaac, but there was also the Lamb of God who became the substitute for us all when he gave his life on the cross. As we trust him who has sacrificed everything for our sakes, we discover a love that will also, in time, bring us life that is both abundant and eternal. And like Abraham, we do not trust Jesus with blind faith. He has an extensive track record with us, unblemished and unparalleled. Jesus has never failed you! He has given his life for you, demonstrated his love for you. He has shown his authority over all things – even sin, even death! You can now trust him even when you do not understand him.

So here is the question. Here’s what I’m hoping you will do this week, even this morning. Do you have the courage to name your idol, or at least the thing in life that is perilously close to taking God’s rightful place in your heart? This is repentance, and it where the journey always begins. We name the good thing we are trying to make an ultimate thing. What, besides Christ, are you looking to as the source of your identity in life, that which you hope will make you feel worthy and define who you are? What, besides Christ, is the source of your security? What thing, if taken away, would make you feel desperate, unsure of how to go on in life? What, besides Christ, is giving your life ultimate meaning, fueling your purpose for living? For the rich young ruler it was his wealth. For the Samaritan woman at the well it was the affection of a man. For Abraham it was his son, Isaac. I think I know what it is for me because I’ve been reflecting on this all week. What is it for you?

Do you have the courage to name it today? Do not pretend that there is no idol lurking in your heart.

There surely is. It is a good thing, likely, that wants to become for you an ultimate thing. Make no effort to cover it up. Don’t be vague but specific. Do not defend or excuse yourself. Lay it before God. “Lord, I confess it is my career that gives me my identity. Lord, I’m more worried about losing my money than I’m worried about losing you. Lord, I believe I simply could not live another day if this person were taken from me. They are life to me.” This is the testing place. And as Tozer puts it, “There will be no dozen possible choices for us; just one and an alternative, but our whole future will be conditioned by the choice we make.”

Do this for me. Take out your Next Step insert from your bulletin. On the inside, where the questions are, you’ll see an empty box. I want you to fill in that box. I’m going to leave a minute of silence. I want you to turn to God in the silence of your heart and ask him to show you what thing it is he wants you to offer to him. Even if you aren’t sure you want to offer it, ask him to show you nonetheless. Then I want you to write that thing in the box. You are not going to be forced to show this to anybody else, though some of you will want to take the opportunity this week to do. You can decide that later. For now, be as honest as you can between yourself and God. And as you name this thing before God, say to God, if you are able with his help, say to him, “Here I am. Here I am Lord.”

Let’s be silent before the Lord...

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read the account of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22:1-14. What stands out to you from this story?
2. God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac. We have the account of this recorded in God’s Word. How do we possibly make sense of this?
3. Why doesn’t Abraham object?
4. How does it sit with you that God apparently goes out of his way to put his people to the test? Has God ever put you to the test? Would you want him to put you to the test?

¹⁶ Matthew 6:33 (NIV)

5. Jesus teaches his followers, **“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”**¹⁷ What does he mean? How does this apply to this story of Abraham and Isaac?
6. A.W. Tozer says, “Everything is safe which we commit to [God], and nothing is really safe which is not committed.” What do you think he means? Do you agree?
7. Name the idol that threatens to take a place on the throne in your heart that is meant for God alone to occupy. Maybe the idol sits there even now! What besides God are you trusting in to provide ultimate identity, security and meaning in life?
8. What step is God calling you to take to ‘sacrifice’ that idol to him? Are you willing to say “Here I Am Lord”?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Why does God want to be the most important thing in our lives?

¹⁷ Matthew 16:24 (NRSV)