

**“The LORD Who Provides”
by Rev. Frances Savill
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Genesis 22:1-19

“After these things God tested Abraham.”

Faith that is not tested isn't faith, or at least it is not known in fact to be faith until it is tested. It might be wishful thinking.

And so, the way of faith requires repeated testing so that we can discern whether we are dealing with the living God or some fantasy or illusion we have cooked up.

Testing of faith secures us in the knowledge that our faith is in the living God.

We all have it happen, we feel inclined to pick up the phone, or send a letter, an e-mail, an elder drop by, a lay pastor calls to check up, or calls about a visit, and suddenly you find you're in the exact right place at the exact right time or you find someone comes to you when you needed to see God's care most clearly.

When we get better at listening for that voice that says “go”, “call”, “visit”, “stop”, “write”, we learn to recognize the voice of God. When we learn to respond to that voice, we walk the road of faith, our faith grows. With each encounter with God, with each test, our faith grows.

“After these things God tested Abraham.”

Abraham had been tested many times before – sometimes he was obedient. God said “go” and Abraham picked up and went. He went to a new land at God's command.

But Abraham also failed a lot of tests. He let the Pharaoh of Egypt believe Sarah was his sister - because he was afraid. He didn't trust God to deliver them and so he created a story, and it went badly for everyone.

“So after these things God tested Abraham.”

This is where the passage stops making sense. We understand testing, but we do not understand what God asked from Abraham.

“Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and offer him as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will show you.”

This command is unbelievable to us, in so many ways. Isaac is the sign of the covenant promise of God. Isaac was the son God gave Abraham in his old age. Isaac is the one through whom God was going to bless Abraham and make him the father of many. God's promises depended on Isaac living.

Also, this passage is scant in detail, except one detail is repeated, “take your son, your only son whom you love.” Abraham was not asked to sacrifice some stranger, some enemy, he was asked to sacrifice Isaac, his son, whom he loved.

Abraham, in faith, obeyed. We aren't told any of how Abraham felt. What we are told is that Abraham went, he set out on the journey as God commanded. He got the firewood, the fire, the servants to help with the journey, and his son Isaac.

Reading the story, it all seems a little surreal, the stuff of nightmares.

The Apostle Paul called Abraham the father of faith. Sacrifice is to faith what eating is to nutrition. Eating is how we are nourished. Sacrifice is how our faith is nourished.

When you make that phone call, stop for that visit, you sacrifice your time, some of your energy and your agenda. Sometimes we are called to give financially, to sacrifice so that God's work can go forward, so we can show God's love in a tangible way. God's tests always involve some level of sacrifice.

But consider for a moment what sacrifice is.

Sacrifice is not an embittered giving up or a whine of resentment of handing over. Sacrifice is freely placing a gift in God's hands and then watching in wonder and awe what God will do with it. You watch as God makes something far more beautiful, and lovely out of your gift. It is multiplied in God's hands, and you find yourself with far more than you gave.

Sacrifices given in worship, for the people of God, in the early days of Israel's history, were God's way of restoring the people to a right covenantal relationship with God again. Through their gifts, their offerings, placed on the altar, God brought them forgiveness, healing, restoration, and they were formed as God's own people.

Consider the New Testament story of the boy who sacrificed his lunch, gave it to Jesus. In Jesus' hands, the simple loaves and fishes became enough to feed a multitude.

When you offer God your gift of energy, when you sacrifice your agenda and go where God leads you, when you give a financial gift, you find God using your sacrifice. What you placed in God's hands, becomes something extraordinary, and you find you are in God's presence; and God grows you in faith and your gift does far more than you could have imagined.

You are not made less by your sacrifice; you are made more.

Abraham was called to sacrifice Isaac, to give him back to God, to place his son in God's hands, to entrust the promises of God back to God, and to give him the son whom he loved.

These are hard words.

Marva Dawn points out that this text is partly about Abraham coming to know who God is. The Canaanite gods, the idols of the nations around Abraham, called for children to be sacrificed. Child sacrifices were certainly common enough in Abraham's time and the culture around him. Abraham went up the mountain with God who seemed to be like the gods of the Canaanites.

He came down the mountain, having seen the provision of the LORD, the covenant God of Israel, who did not ask him to take the life of his son, but who provided his own sacrifice. Yahweh, the covenant LORD of Israel was not like the gods of the nations.

Abraham placed his son in the hands of the LORD, who can bring good out of evil, healing out of suffering, peace out of disorder, resurrection out of crucifixion, life out of death.

We know how this story ends. After placing Isaac on the altar, God stopped Abraham from taking Isaac's life, and God provided a ram.

For those who know the gospel, we know that though the LORD spared the life of Isaac, he did not spare the life of his own Son.

We see God's overwhelming love for us in this:
That the LORD sent his one and only Son, the beloved of God's own being, his son whom he loved, and he gave him as a sacrifice for us.
Jesus placed himself on the altar of the cross, he gave himself into God's hands as a sacrifice. And God did exceedingly more than we could have imagined through his sacrifice.

God raised him from death. He trampled down death by death, opening the way for all of us to be forgiven, to have life in Jesus' name.

There is a mystery about God's way sometimes.
God is not ours to control or command. We are called to obey, to sacrifice, to give, to be tested, but always God's view is in love. God's purpose is always to grow us, to free us, to give joy, and open spaces so that we might receive more and more of God, God's love and God's goodness.

Isaac was set free. Jesus was raised from the dead. God's love is faithful. Abraham walked down the mountain with Isaac knowing that the LORD, the covenant God, does provide.

Thanks be to God.