

Chapter 16: The Cure of Abraham

Genesis 22:1–24

The sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22 is one of the most well known stories in the Bible. Abraham exercises extraordinary faith by not sparing his only son as a sacrifice to God. Abraham demonstrates his willingness to obey whatever the Lord asks him to do, up until the point when God intervenes to stop Abraham going through with the actual sacrifice. Why, though, does God ask Abraham to make this kind of sacrifice? Why does God *test* (Gen. 22:1) Abraham in this way? Furthermore, what should we learn from this story to understand how God works in our own lives?

Certainly, God does not ask Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice because *God* needs something. Indeed, God does not need the blood of the animal sacrifices he demands (Ps. 50:12–15), and God is in no way “served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything” (Acts 17:25). It is not *God* who needs this sacrifice, then, but *Abraham*. Over the course of Abraham’s walk with the Lord, we have seen him trust and obey for the most part. Nevertheless, there are a few cases where Abraham has chosen to obey his fears regarding famine (Gen. 12:10–20), infertility (Gen. 16), and his own safety (Gen. 20) rather than trusting and obeying God. Therefore, for as much as the Lord has accomplished in Abraham, God recognizes that Abraham still needs more sanctification. Along these lines, the Lord gives Abraham a test—not to trick Abraham, but to heal the deep wounds of sin in his soul. Along these lines, the 16th century German Protestant Reformer Martin Bucer insightfully notes that our sins wound and injure our souls:

The injured and broken sheep are all those who while remaining in the fellowship of Christ are hurt and injured in their inner being; it is as if they have destroyed and shattered a spiritual limb, i.e. the virtuous and godly ability to do those things which are excellent and right....These parts and limbs of the inner heavenly being are injured, shattered, destroyed and broken through serious and gross failings and sins.¹

By this test, God will heal the wounds that sin has inflicted on Abraham’s soul. In Genesis 22, then, we learn that *God heals our innermost injuries by calling us to sacrifice our most precious possessions*.

God Prescribes Sacrifice (Gen. 22:1–6)

The end of Genesis 21 almost sounded like the “happily ever after” line from fairy tales: “And Abraham sojourned many days in the land of the Philistines” (Gen. 21:34). The life of Abraham, however, is not a fairy tale. Abraham’s story is at the heart of God’s story of redeeming and restoring his people and the totality of creation. Abraham, then, still has one more major test to endure before his death:

[1] After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” [2] He 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 of which I shall tell you.” (Gen. 22:1–2)

The phrase “after these things” links this passage back to the joyful and painful events of Genesis 21.² There, after God finally gave Abraham and Sarah their son of promise, Isaac, God also commanded Abraham to send away his son of the flesh, Ishmael. Genesis 22 reuses several themes and key words from Genesis 21 in such a way to suggest that the sacrifice of Isaac is the second installment of Abraham’s casting out of his sons.³ For example, both Ishmael (Gen. 21:12) and Isaac (Gen. 22:22) are described as “boys”—that is, perhaps teenagers—when God calls Abraham to sacrifice them from his life.⁴ All of these common links underscore the costliness of Abraham’s sacrifice.

The Testing of Abraham

Clearly, Genesis 21 was a *test* for Abraham, although the text does not use that word. Genesis 22, however, explicitly describes God’s command as a *test* (Gen. 22:1): “Abraham’s trust was to be weighed in the balance against common sense, human affection, and lifelong ambition; in act against everything earthly.”⁵ The word “test” can carry many meanings. God’s *testing* of his people variously becomes “a means for revealing their obedience (e.g., Exod 15:25; 16:4; Judg 2:22), producing fear so as to engender piety (Exod 20:20; Ps 26:2), discovering their authenticity (Deut 8:2; 13:3[4]; 2 Chr 32:31), and producing their well-being (Deut 8:16).”⁶ On the other hand, when human beings put *God* to the test, they are “acting out of a weakened faith or a lack of faith (cf. Exod. 17:7; Num. 14:22).”⁷ In this case, the point of the testing will demonstrate what Abraham “is really like... [through] difficulty or hardship.”⁸ That is, this test will measure “to what extent he would obey” in order to determine “the quality of [his] faithfulness.”⁹

It is significant that the text tells us from the very beginning that this event is a test. Without this explanation, “God’s request that Abraham offer up Isaac as a ‘burnt offering’ would be inexplicable.”¹⁰ We readers understand from the beginning that God is not interested in child sacrifice—and indeed, God will later clarify that he finds child sacrifice abominable (Lev. 18:21; 20:1–5; Deut. 12:29–31; 18:10). It is interesting to note that the narrative begins by speaking of “God” (Gen. 22:1, 3, 8, 9, 12) and only later, after the test is completed, begins to speak of “Yahweh” (ESV: “the LORD”; Gen. 22:11, 14, 15, 16). This may indicate the theological idea that God, as Creator, commands obedience from Abraham, while God, as Yahweh the Covenant Lord, stops Abraham from carrying the sacrifice out once Abraham demonstrates his obedience.¹¹ The text even draws attention to the surprising nature of this test by an unusual word order: “Normal Hebrew syntax calls for the verb to precede the subject; hence we would expect: ‘tested [God] Abraham.’ But the placing of the subject first, as here, draws special attention to it: ‘[God]—he tested Abraham!’”¹²

Abraham, of course, does not have this information as he undergoes his test: “like Job, Abraham was unaware that his trial was a test; for him it was totally real.”¹³ John Calvin captures well the various levels of pain involved in the test that God sets before him: “It was sad for him to be deprived of his only son, sadder still that this one should be torn away by a violent death, but by far the most grievous that he himself should be appointed as the executioner to slay him with his own hand.”¹⁴ On

the one hand, then, the text goes out of its way “to dispel any suspense or suspicion about the Lord’s real intention.”¹⁵ On the other hand, part of the drama and torture and wonder of this passage is to recognize the way in which Abraham’s faith leads him to obey to all the way to the end, even without knowing that this is only a test: “The test, instead of breaking him, brings him to the summit of his lifelong walk with God.”¹⁶ Fittingly, each major section of this narrative will be marked with Abraham’s statement of humble obedience: “Here I am” (Gen. 22:1, 7, 11).¹⁷

We must recognize that this test is not a *punishment* but a medicine for Abraham’s injuries. Abraham’s failures along the way demonstrate that he still needs more work of sanctification in his life. In other words, Abraham has not *yet* demonstrated that he truly fears God (Gen. 22:12), since he has withheld obedience from God at several key points. Nevertheless, this test is not a *penance* to make up for Abraham’s past sins. Abraham is counted righteous on the basis of his faith (Gen. 15:6), and not on the basis of his own penitential suffering. Rather than applying this test to heal Abraham’s *past* sins, God is working to heal Abraham’s *present* and *future* sins. That is, we need tests not to obtain forgiveness from sins (Christ has already accomplished that through his cross), but “in order that sins should be better recognized and shunned, and the grace of Christ treasured the more precious, and more diligence used in order that this grace may not be received in vain, and that precautions might be taken to prevent the person immediately falling into sin again.”¹⁸ That is, God calls us to sacrifice the things that we love with idolatrous affection so that we may learn to love God with pure hearts.

The Call of Abraham (Part 2)

Genesis 22 includes Yahweh’s final words to Abraham. In several ways, these words echo God’s first words to Abraham back in Genesis 12:1: “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” There and here, God begins with a command: “Go” (Gen. 12:1) and “Take” (Gen. 22:2).¹⁹ Then, God spells out exactly what Abraham must sacrifice with three phrases that move from general to specific: “your country and your kindred and your father’s house” (Gen. 12:1), and then “your son, your only son, Isaac” (Gen. 22:2).²⁰ Finally, God gives less-than-explicit directions of where Abraham should go: “to the land that I will show you” (Gen. 12:1), and then “to the land of Moriah...on one of the mountains which I shall tell you” (Gen. 22:2). Not only must Abraham trust God to *go* from his father’s house and to *take* Isaac for a sacrifice, but Abraham must trust God to lead him along the way. Like the first call to Abraham, the patriarch must exercise great faith to obey such cryptic instructions for doing something so sacrificial. Also like the first call to Abraham, God will bless him for his faith-driven obedience.

God asks Abraham to go “to the land of Moriah” (Gen. 22:2): “*Moriah* reappears only in 2 Chronicles 3:1, where it is identified as the place where God halted the plague of Jerusalem and where Solomon built the temple. In New Testament terms, this is the vicinity of Calvary.”²¹ Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac will set the tone for all the subsequent sacrifices in this region, since God asks Abraham to offer Isaac “as a burnt offering.” Gordon Wenham’s explanation of the nature and significance of offering a firstborn son as a burnt offering is worth quoting at length:

A burnt offering involves cutting up and burning the whole animal on the altar and was the commonest type of sacrifice. It seems to have expressed at least two ideas: that the offerer is giving himself entirely to God (for the animal represents the offerer) and that the animal’s

death atones for the worshiper's sin. The usual victims of burnt offerings were birds, sheep, or if the worshiper was very wealthy, a bull. But to offer one's child was quite out of the question for devout orthodox worshipers. "Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" asks Micah (6:7), expecting his hearers to reply with an emphatic no (cf. Lev 18:21; 20:2–5). But it was done occasionally in the biblical world, especially in times of dire crisis (Judg 11:31–40; 2 Kgs 3:27; 17:17). In fact, biblical law expects every firstborn son to be dedicated to God but insists that he be redeemed and an animal offered instead (Exod 22:29[30]; 34:20). Later, the Levites by their service were seen as consecrated to God instead of the firstborn in each family (Num 3:45–49). And it is this background of thought that, as Westermann points out, makes the test comprehensible.²²

On the one hand, God explicitly forbids parents from offering their children as burnt offerings, according to the practices of the pagan nations who surrounded Israel. On the other hand, God also continues to claim the firstborn sons of Israel, since God spares Israel's firstborn sons from the tenth plague of Egypt. God allows the Israelites to redeem their firstborn back through an animal sacrifice, and later by claiming the Levites for himself. Only of Abraham does God ask for the *sacrifice* of the firstborn.

God knows what an extraordinary sacrifice this is for Abraham. It would be overwhelming for any parent to sacrifice a child, but for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac is of a different order of sacrifice altogether: "We must always remember that Isaac was not a son of the common order, but one in whose person the Mediator was promised."²³ Even on the level of propagating Abraham's family line, Abraham has already sent away Ishmael, so that Isaac is his only hope of descendants. To sacrifice Isaac, then, is to blot out Abraham's name from the earth: "The real test is whether Abraham will sacrifice the one person who can perpetuate the promises of God, and particularly those promises that his posterity should thrive."²⁴ Then, as Abraham considers the wider scope of God's promises surrounding Isaac, he must come to recognize that slaughtering Isaac would have grave consequences for blessing all the families of the earth (cf. Gen. 12:3): "in the person of this son, the whole salvation of the world seemed to be extinguished and to perish."²⁵ Our English translations hide one of the poignant hints that God "appreciates the costliness of what he is asking" of Abraham: "*Please* take your son...."²⁶ The word that we typically translate as "please" or "I beg you" is rarely used by God (only five out of the sixty uses in Genesis), but each "time God asks the individual to do something staggering, something that defies rational explanation or understanding."²⁷

Abraham's Obedience

The text does not tell us anything about Abraham's "inner feelings at this point," which gives our imaginations "a free reign."²⁸ The only information we have comes through the actions and words of Abraham, who captivates our attention:²⁹

[3] So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. [4] On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. [5] Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you." (Gen.

22:3–5)

Just as Abraham arose early in the morning to send away Ishmael and Hagar (Gen. 21:14; cf. Gen. 19:27; 20:8), so also Abraham arises early in the morning to sacrifice his only remaining son.³⁰ The narrative gives us several details of Abraham's preparation (saddling his donkey, taking two young men, and cutting wood) that have nothing to do with the rest of the narrative, which "prolongs the narrative with excessive and deliberate details."³¹ These details only heighten our curiosity as to Abraham's thoughts as he carries out these preparations. The notable irony of Abraham's preparations, of course, is that he prepares everything other than "the all-important sacrificial subject itself. In fact, unknown to the others, Abraham does bring the sacrificial lamb (Isaac)."³²

The three-day journey must be excruciating for Abraham: "God does not require him to put his son immediately to death, but compels him to revolve this execution in his mind during three whole days, that in preparing to sacrifice his son, he may still more severely torture all his senses."³³ In Genesis and Exodus, the "third day" often describes some ominous event (cf. Gen. 34:25; 40:20; 42:18; Ex. 19:11, 16), so that the third day of this journey may "underscore the drama in the narrative."³⁴ It is only on the third day that Abraham is able to "lift up his eyes" to see the place from afar (Gen. 22:4).

At this point, Abraham leaves his two young men and the donkey behind, so that only he and Isaac will go "over there and worship and come again to you" (Gen. 22:5). Gordon Wenham summarizes three possible ways that Bible commentators have interpreted Abraham's promise that he and the boy will return:

First, it could be a white lie to disguise the true nature of the sacrifice. It is clear from Isaac's question in v 7 that Abraham has not been very explicit about the nature of the sacrifice he is undertaking. Evidently he must have said he was going to offer a burnt offering at God's special request but never said who the victim would be. So one could suppose that here he is simply continuing to allow his entourage to continue under the illusion that he intended to make a normal animal sacrifice, albeit at a special site. Second, it could be read as implying that he does not intend to sacrifice Isaac after all, that he cannot see himself going through with it, and that he will disobey God's command. Third, it may be read as an affirmative of faith, that although he has been told to sacrifice Isaac, yet somehow the promises made to him that "your descendants will be named through Isaac" would be fulfilled.³⁵

The New Testament is very clear that the third explanation is accurate: "[17] By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, [18] of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." [19] He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back" (Heb. 11:17–19). Abraham is promising to return with "full conviction, on the ground that 'in Isaac shall thy seed be called' (21:12)."³⁶ Or, as Victor Hamilton writes, "Abraham went beyond Job's 'the Lord gives and the Lord takes away (Job 1:21) with his own 'the Lord gives, the Lord takes away, and the Lord gives back.'"³⁷

Bearing his own Cross

Even so, the pain of the sacrifice becomes more excruciating as Abraham and Isaac continue up the mountain: “And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together” (Gen. 22:6). Abraham demonstrates his determination to carry on as he loads the wood for the burnt offering on Isaac’s back and taking up the fire and the knife in his own hand.³⁸ The text uses the same verb to describe how Abraham “laid” the wood on Isaac as when Abraham “put” the skin of water on Hagar’s shoulder (Gen. 21:14) before sending her and Ishmael off into the wilderness: “It is hard to say which tore more at the heart of Abraham—placing the bread and water on Hagar’s shoulders, or placing the wood on Isaac’s shoulders.”³⁹ Of course, it is hard to imagine Isaac carrying the wood for his own sacrifice on his back without thinking of the way that our Lord Jesus also carried the wood for his own sacrifice: “So they took Jesus, and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called the place of a skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha” (John 19:16–17).⁴⁰

God Provides a Substitute (Gen. 22:7–14)

As though the pain could not grow more acute, Isaac now asks his father about the sacrifice:

[7] And Isaac said to his father Abraham, “My father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” He said, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” [8] Abraham said, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So they went both of them together. (Gen. 22:7–8)

In response to Isaac’s “My father!”, Abraham repeats the same, self-sacrificial words of humility that Abraham earlier spoke to God: “*Here I am*, my son” (Gen. 22:7; cf. Gen. 22:1). Isaac then asks a very natural question: “where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” (Gen. 22:7). This question must tear Abraham’s heart apart, since Abraham must think carefully how to address his dear son’s question: “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son” (Gen. 22:8). Abraham’s response could be interpreted in a variety of ways, as possibly “another case of evasiveness, an expression of faith, a prophecy, or a prayer.”⁴¹ Without question, however, Abraham is professing his faith in God’s providential goodness. John Calvin wisely observes, “Whenever the Lord gives a command, many things are perpetually occurring to enfeeble our purpose: means fail, we are destitute of counsel, all avenues seem closed. In such straits, the only remedy against despondency is, to leave the event to God, in order that he may open a way for us where there is none.”⁴² By this, Abraham expresses “complete certainty of God, together with complete openness as to detail, makes this a model reply to an agonizing question. God’s method was his own affair; it would take them both by surprise.”⁴³ After these words, the two continue forward together: “Note how the scene is framed by ‘So they went both of them together’ (vv 6, 8), suggesting both their isolation and their companionship as they climb alone up the mountainside.”⁴⁴

Preparing the Sacrifice

Finally, Abraham and his beloved son Isaac arrive at the place for the sacrifice. The scene of Abraham’s preparations to sacrifice his son are tortured and heart-rending:

[9] When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. [10] Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. (Gen. 22:9–10)

Part of what makes these verses so difficult to read is the way that the narrative slows down to capture even minute details of the preparations—this “is consummate story-telling throughout.”⁴⁵ First, the father and son come “to the place of which God had told him” (Gen. 22:9), a line that “reminds us that Abraham is obeying God, not acting out his own will.”⁴⁶ Then, we read detail after agonizing detail of how Abraham builds the altar, lays the wood. Finally, the moment can be delayed no longer: Abraham binds his son and lays his son on the altar, on top of the wood.

Like a Lamb Led to the Slaughter

As we think through this event, we should recognize the relative strength of both men. If Abraham was 100 when Isaac was born (Gen. 21:5), and the word “boy” (Gen. 22:5) suggests that Isaac is at least a teenager, Abraham must be a minimum of 115 or so. Abraham is an elderly man, while Isaac is in the prime of his strength. The clear implication of this passage is that no “force was employed against the youth, as against one struggling and unwilling to die: but rather, that he voluntarily surrendered himself.”⁴⁷ The narrative primarily describes the activity of Abraham, but we must also take notice of the passive faith and obedience of Isaac: “Isaac too comes briefly into his own—not by what he does but by what he suffers. Here, it seems, is his role, undistinguished though he may be in himself. Others will do exploits; it is left to this quiet victim, in a single episode, to demonstrate God’s pattern for the chosen ‘seed’: to be a servant sacrificed.”⁴⁸ Isaac gives us a glimpse of his most glorious descendant, the Lord Jesus Christ. Each man “was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth” (Isa. 53:7).

Sparing the Son

Genesis 22:10 leaves us in suspense, with Abraham’s hand outstretched with the knife that would slaughter his own son. Only at this last, cliff-hanging moment does the messenger of Yahweh intervene to spare Abraham’s son:

[11] But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” [12] He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” [13] And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. [14] So Abraham called the name of that place, “The LORD will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.” (Gen. 22:11–14)

We should notice several factors about the description of Yahweh’s interruption of Abraham’s sacrifice.⁴⁹ First, this is the first time that the covenant name *Yahweh* (ESV: “the LORD”) is used in

this passage to describe the God who demanded this sacrifice. Second, the angel of Yahweh calls out from heaven, which “emphasizes the urgency and importance of what follows (cf. 21:17).” Third, the angel of Yahweh urgently speaks Abraham’s name twice (“Abraham, Abraham!”), in contrast with the single use of Abraham’s name in Genesis 22:1. Finally, Abraham’s words, “Here I am,” mark Abraham’s third and final such response of self-sacrificial humility. Even at this point, Abraham is faithful, willing, and obedient to do the will of the Lord, whatever that may be.

All of this comes not a moment too late, and the “exact moment of intervention wrings the last drop of meaning from the experience. On the human side, the ultimate sacrifice is faced and willed; on the divine side, not a vestige of harm is permitted, and not a nuance of devotion is unnoticed.”⁵⁰ Abraham has passed the test, so the angel of Yahweh ensures that Isaac will not be sacrificed. From this, Allen Ross clarifies that, as a test, “the real point of the act was Abraham’s sacrifice of himself, that is, of his will and his wisdom with regard to his son Isaac.”⁵¹ God’s desire was never to shed the blood of Isaac, but rather for Abraham to offer *himself* up as a living sacrifice to the Lord by his willingness to shed the blood of his son (cf. Rom. 12:1). That is, God wants Abraham to put to death the sin in his heart that has led him away from God.

Now that Abraham has demonstrated his willingness to sacrifice his son (that is, now that Abraham has sacrificed *himself*), the angel of Yahweh declares, “now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me” (Gen. 22:12). Note from this that the “angel of Yahweh” speaks of how Abraham has not withheld his son “from me,” demonstrating that this angel of Yahweh is indeed Yahweh himself (cf. Gen. 21:18). Importantly, Yahweh is not saying that he has learned some new bit of information that he did not have earlier. Rather, the phrase “now I *know*” refers not to *cognition* but to *experience*, as John Walton notes:

We must differentiate between knowledge as *cognition* and knowledge as *experience*. We can agree that God knew ahead of time what Abraham was going to do. But there is ample evidence throughout Scripture that God desires us to act out our faith and worship regardless of the fact that he knows our hearts. God wants us to pray even though he knows what we are going to say and may already have the answer in motion. He wants us to praise him even though he knows how we feel. God asks us to express our faith and love. It is honoring to him for us to demonstrate those things that he knows exist because it pleases him. That is what I mean when I speak of God’s “benefit.” We all know that as much as our parents, spouses, and children know that we love them, it is important that it be said and demonstrated. Cognitive knowledge is not enough and is often less than satisfying.⁵²

The fact that Abraham did not withhold his son from Yahweh demonstrates that Abraham now *fears* the Lord: “The one who truly feared the Lord reckoned that compliance with the Word of God, no matter what the cost, was the primary responsibility....The true worshiper fears the Lord, that is, the true worshiper draws near the Lord in love and adoration and reverence but shrinks back in fear of such an awesome deity.”⁵³ In other words, Yahweh is declaring the *results* of Abraham’s test. It is not enough to say merely that the test *revealed* Abraham’s fear of the Lord; rather, it would be better to say that the test played a role in *producing* Abraham’s fear of the Lord. By leading Abraham through the pain of offering up his only Son, God taught Abraham to fear him above anyone or anything else. God accomplished his intended work in Abraham. The test was passed.

The only other place in the Bible where God’s “testing” and the resulting “fear” of God occur together are on Mount Sinai, immediately after the giving of the Ten Commandments: “Moses said to the people, ‘Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin’” (Ex. 20:20).⁵⁴ That is, God’s law *tests* us in order to provoke the *fear* of him in our hearts, just as God sought from Abraham in Genesis 22.

A Substitute Sacrifice

At this point, Abraham once again “lifts up his eyes” (Gen. 22:13; cf. Gen. 22:4) to see “a ram, caught in the thicket by his horns.” Just as God opened Hagar’s eyes to see the provision of a well of water to save her son Ishmael (Gen. 21:19), so Yahweh shows Abraham the provision of a ram that Abraham can offer as a substitute to save his son Isaac (Gen. 22:13).⁵⁵ The text tells us nothing of the responses of Abraham or Isaac, but only of the provision that Yahweh makes.⁵⁶ So, Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering *instead* of his son (Gen. 22:13). Therefore, Abraham calls that place “The LORD will provide” (Gen. 22:14). This phrase, “the LORD will provide” (*YHWH yir’eh*), is virtually identical (apart from the different divine name) to Abraham’s words in Genesis 22:8: “God will provide” (*’elohim yir’eh*).⁵⁷ Although Abraham could have called the place “Abraham obeyed,” he rather minimizes his own story in order to glorify the gracious provision of Yahweh: “The reader will come away from this story more impressed with God’s faithfulness than with Abraham’s compliance.”⁵⁸ It may also be worth noting that the word “provide” in Hebrew comes from the same verb “to see” (as in, “see to it”), so that the verb in both its senses appears many times in this passage (Gen. 22:4, 8, 13, 14 [x2]).⁵⁹

The Son Not Spared

This passage forms a shocking background for Paul’s words about God’s love toward us in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ: “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32). Abraham did not spare his own son (Gen. 22:12), but the angel of Yahweh does intervene to spare Isaac. On the other hand, Jesus could have asked—but did not—the Father to intervene (Matt. 26:53), and the Father could have intervened but instead forsook Jesus (Matt. 27:46). While Abraham demonstrates extraordinary faith in God, the contrast between these passages demonstrates God’s super-extraordinary love toward us by not sparing his own Son for us on the cross. From this, Paul urges us to live in confidence that, if God did not spare his own Son, there is no reason to believe that God will withhold *anything* needful from us.

Furthermore, this passage gives us confidence in God’s provision which should enable us to sacrifice whatever he asks for us—including when he asks us to sacrifice something that we believe to be godly. Allen Ross writes this:

The Lord calls believers to obey his instructions, including sacrificing themselves and their possessions to him in fear and devotion. This step may require relinquishing some personal possession, ambition, or direction that seems clearly to be God’s design. Although we cannot completely approximate the patriarchal event, the sacrifice of something dear to the heart could be as difficult and demonstrable as Abraham’s sacrifice. Christ’s requirements for disciples allowed now rival loyalties and no holding back. The Christian life became a life of

worship in which the true worshipers feared the Lord and surrendered themselves to him.⁶⁰

This will never mean that we should take the life of a human being or disown family members in a manner contrary to the word of God. Nevertheless, God may call us to sacrifice roles and relationships that we believe to be fruitful, strategic, or God-glorifying. Indeed, those sacrifices may be the most difficult for us to tolerate, since we may be mingling our love for God with some kind of status or significance that we gain from these *apart* from God. We should learn from this passage though, that when God leads us to give these things up, he does so in order to bring greater glory to himself and good for us than we could gain by clinging to them. No matter what he asks us to give up, he promises that he will continue to be the Lord who provides.

God Promises Satisfaction (Gen. 22:15–24)

At this point, the angel of Yahweh speaks a second time:

[15] And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven [16] and said, “By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, [17] I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, [18] and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.” [19] So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba. And Abraham lived at Beersheba. (Gen. 22:15–19)

By describing this call as coming “a second time from heaven,” the narrative separates this portion from the rest of the test.⁶¹ Abraham has passed the test (including receiving the Lord’s praise), and now a second wave of implications come. The promises in this section are not particularly new, apart from promising that Abraham’s offspring will “possess the gate of his enemies” (Gen. 22:17), which is perhaps a variation of God’s promise to curse anyone who dishonors Abraham (Gen. 12:3). Additionally, it is slightly new to describe the multitude of Abraham’s as “sand that is on the seashore” (Gen. 22:17; cf. Gen. 13:16; 15:4; 17:4–6).⁶² The newness of these promises, then, is not in any new content, but in their new significance in light of Abraham’s faithful obedience: “What God had promised to Abraham before Isaac was born, he now again confirms and ratifies, after Isaac was restored to life, and arose from the altar, — as if it had been from the sepulcher, — to achieve a more complete triumph.”⁶³

Therefore, Yahweh begins by announcing that, “By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD” (Gen. 22:16). The author of Hebrews explains that typically people swear by something greater than themselves (Heb. 6:16), but “[17] when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, [18] so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us” (Heb. 6:17–18). On this basis, Yahweh establishes these promises on the firmest ground possible: in *himself*.

Blessings for Obedience

Additionally, Yahweh establishes these promises on a new rationale: Abraham's obedience. He continues, saying, "because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son..." (Gen. 22:16). As in the testing of Hagar and of Job, Abraham's obedience in the midst of suffering gains him new blessings from God.⁶⁴ As Derek Kidner comments, "To obey is to find new assurance, as Abraham had discovered in 13:14ff."⁶⁵ All that God previously promised—to bless Abraham, to multiply Abraham's offspring innumerable, for his offspring to bless all the nations of the earth—God now promises to Abraham "because you have obeyed my voice" (Gen. 22:18).

This does not mean that Abraham's obedience *earned* him anything from God. Whenever God rewards our obedience, he is piling up grace on top of grace, since our faith (Eph. 2:8), our desire, and our energy to obey God (Phil. 2:13) are all gifts from God himself: "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me" (1 Cor. 15:10). Therefore, we have nothing to boast about before God, even though God uniquely blesses our obedience. While God frequently promises to bless Abraham (Gen. 12:2–3; 14:19; 17:16, 20; 24:1, 35), this is the only point in Genesis when God swears that he will "surely bless" him (Gen. 22:17).⁶⁶ Indeed, the only truly new aspect of these promises is that they reflect *conditionality*: "that human behavior determines God's response. These promises are uttered and shall be fulfilled *because* Abraham has done the appropriate thing."⁶⁷ Again, the point is not that Abraham has earned or merited the blessings, for Abraham still cannot claim that God owes him anything from this experience. Rather, as Gordon Wenham points out, "This is analogous to the assumptions underlying intercessory prayer. Here, too, faithful human response to God is taken up and incorporated within the purposes and activity of God."⁶⁸ God promises to answer prayers and to bless obedience, even though God denies that our prayers or obedience *obligate* him to act. Again, this is grace on top of grace.

Paradoxically, then, God promises that we will be *more* happy when we sacrifice our most precious possessions for him. We believe that our satisfaction is dependent on the good gifts that we cling to, but God tells us something very different. Greater joy comes through greater devotion to the Lord. The only way for us to learn how much greater our satisfaction in God will be from the satisfaction we will have from the world is to trust him and to obey what he says.

A Future for Isaac

It is in this context of blessings for Abraham's offspring that we can understand the genealogy inserted at the end of Genesis 22:

[20] Now after these things it was told to Abraham, "Behold, Milcah also has borne children to your brother Nahor: [21] Uz his firstborn, Buz his brother, Kemuel the father of Aram, [22] Chesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph, and Bethuel." [23] (Bethuel fathered Rebekah.) These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham's brother. [24] Moreover, his concubine, whose name was Reumah, bore Tebah, Gaham, Tahash, and Maacah. (Gen. 22:20–24)

The primary reason for including this record here is to clarify that Isaac's future wife, Rebekah, descends from Nahor's lawful wife, and not from his concubines (Gen. 22:23).⁶⁹ If Isaac's descendants

will become as innumerable as sand on the seashore, then this “inevitably implies that Isaac must marry, a conclusion reinforced by the analogous developments in the Ishmael story. He too was at death’s door, was rescued by an angel, was promised numerous descendants, and eventually married (21:15–21).”⁷⁰ Finally, the twelve sons of Nahor listed here seem to correspond not only to the twelve sons of Israel (Gen. 49:28), but also to the twelve sons of Ishmael (Gen. 25:12–15).⁷¹ At the beginning of the chapter, God called Abraham to sacrifice Isaac; here at the end, Abraham learns of the family who will provide Isaac’s future.

Discussion Questions

1. What kind of injuries do we inflict on ourselves from our sin? How does God go about healing our sin-inflicted injuries? In what sense does this test of sacrificing Isaac “heal” Abraham? In what sense do our own sacrifices “heal” us? Why does God prescribe *this* medicine? What does this tell us about the depth of our sin? What does this tell us about God’s love for us?
2. What do you think happens *in Abraham* as he obeys God in every step of this passage? How does God stretch his faith in the promises (Gen. 22:5, 8)? Similarly, what happens *in Isaac* as he trustingly permits himself to be bound sacrificially? How does this stretch his faith in the promises of God about him? How has God used tests to stretch your own faith in his promises for you?
3. Why does God provide a substitute to spare Isaac? What does that tell us about why God tested Abraham here? What does this tell us about why God tests us? What does this substitute sacrifice teach us about the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross? Why does God spare Isaac (and you and me), but not his own Son, Jesus Christ? What do we learn about this passage from Romans 8:32?
4. Is it true that unhindered obedience to God can bring us the greatest possible satisfaction in this life? Why, then, do we struggle to believe this? What precious possessions are you most fearful to sacrifice in any sense? How does your affection for them lead you away from fully trusting and obeying God? How might God be calling you to entrust them to him?

Notes

1. Martin Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, trans. Peter Beale (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 71–72.
2. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 113.
3. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 99–100.
4. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 103.
5. Kidner, *Genesis*, 154.
6. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 284.
7. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 392.
8. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 103.
9. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 391, 392.
10. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 177.

11. “God’ (here and in vv 3, 8 with the definite article). It is unusual that this story begins with this generic form rather than with his personal name, ‘the LORD.’ Frequently in Genesis where the body of a story speaks of “God,” the narrative prefaces it by a comment, using his proper name (e.g., 17:1; 21:1). Here the term ‘God’ is used in vv 1, 3, 8, 9, and ‘the LORD’ first appears in v 11 when ‘the angel of the LORD’ calls from heaven....But since, contrary to his usual practice, the narrator also avoids using ‘the LORD’ to introduce the narrative, Delitzsch may be correct to see a theological motive behind the variation. ‘He who requires from Abraham the surrender of Isaac is God the creator...but it is Jahveh in his angel who forbids the extreme act, for the son of promise cannot perish’ (Delitzsch, 2:91).” (Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 103.)

12. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 100–01. For clarity, I replaced Hamilton’s transliterations of “Elohim” and “the Elohim” with the translation “God.”

13. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 113.

14. Calvin, *Genesis*, 559–60. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxviii.i.html>>

15. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 177.

16. Kidner, *Genesis*, 153.

17. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 104.

18. Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, 129.

19. For this entire paragraph, I am indebted to Hamilton’s exegesis: “Yahweh’s first and last words to Abram (12:1; 22:1) begin with an imperative (‘Go...Take...’). Both times the imperative is followed by a triple object: ‘Go forth from (1) your country, (2) your homeland, (3) your father’s house’; ‘Take (1) your son, (2) your only son whom you love, (3) Isaac.’ The objects in 12:1 are arranged in a sequence of less intimate to more intimate. Each succeeding phrase narrows the base as far as Abram is concerned. In both chs. 12 and 22 God’s directive to Abram falls short of supplying explicit directions; Abram is simply pointed in the right direction. About the terminal point of that pilgrimage he is unclear. Here he is told to go to a land ‘which I will show you.’ In ch. 22 he is told to take Isaac to a mountain ‘of which I shall tell you.’” (Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 370–71.)

20. “Each of the objects hits a little closer to home, as the list moves from the general to the more intimate.” (Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 102.)

21. Kidner, *Genesis*, 154.

22. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 105. Dr. Wenham’s book cites Numbers 4:45–49, but this must be a typographical error, which I have corrected.

23. Calvin, *Genesis*, 565. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxviii.i.html>>

24. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 103–04.

25. Calvin, *Genesis*, 560. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxviii.i.html>>

26. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 104.

27. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 101.

28. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 106.

29. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 178.

30. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 106.

31. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 178.

32. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 284.

33. Calvin, *Genesis*, 565. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxviii.i.html>>

34. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 107.

35. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 107.

36. Kidner, *Genesis*, 154.

37. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 108.

38. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 108.

39. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 109.
40. Kidner, *Genesis*, 154.
41. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 108–09.
42. Calvin, *Genesis*, 568. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxviii.i.html>>
43. Kidner, *Genesis*, 154.
44. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 108.
45. Kidner, *Genesis*, 154.
46. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 109.
47. Calvin, *Genesis*, 569. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxviii.i.html>>
48. Kidner, *Genesis*, 153–54.
49. For all the points in this paragraph, see Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 110.
50. Kidner, *Genesis*, 155.
51. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 393.
52. Walton, *Genesis*, 514.
53. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 400.
54. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 284.
55. Kidner, *Genesis*, 155.
56. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 110.
57. Kidner, *Genesis*, 155.
58. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 113–14.
59. Kidner, *Genesis*, 155.
60. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 402.
61. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 179.
62. Kidner, *Genesis*, 155.
63. Calvin, *Genesis*, 571. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxviii.i.html>>
64. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 111.
65. Kidner, *Genesis*, 155.
66. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 111.
67. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 116.
68. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 112.
69. Calvin, *Genesis*, 573. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxviii.i.html>>
70. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 121.
71. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 179.