

## Trust and Obey

Genesis 22:1-19

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Maybe you've read this story from the 22<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Genesis before. Or maybe you've been avoiding it. It's not the easiest story in the Bible to read, to be sure, and you would be in good company – with thousands of other Christians – if you simply wrote it off, saying, "I'm not sure who put this in the Bible, but that is clearly some Old Testament God who no longer applies to me, and boy am I glad." Maybe you've read or heard this story and thought, "I want nothing to do with a God like that, a God who would test someone by asking him to sacrifice his only son, his long-awaited, miraculous, beloved son. This is not my God."

And so you may be wondering why we're talking about this story on Father's Day, of all days. I believe there are beautiful things to be learned from this difficult, complex story. And there may even be things for us to learn about relationships – between fathers and children, yes, but between ourselves and others, as well; and between ourselves and God.

To begin, I have to tell you that this is not a story we can just throw out, as much as we'd like to. We can't say, "Well that's not *my* God," and just ignore this story because the God in the story is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the God of Jesus Christ. If you're a Christian, it *is* your God in the story. Ignoring it will not help. Some interpreters have tried to use this story as the transition point for Israel to turn to "ethical religion," meaning they will from here on stop sacrificing babies to placate Gods and instead will turn to Micah 6, which says, "*Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?*" <sup>8</sup>*He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*" That's another easy way out – to say this is the end of something horrible, thanks be to God, and now we're all on the same page. But that's a reach, too – there's no evidence in this story that either God or Abraham thinks the sacrifice of Isaac would be wrong. So instead of writing it off as some other God, or some turning point in Israel's history to make *them* more like *us*, we have to actually engage the story, dive into it, explore it, and see where it takes us.

First, let's look at the first phrase in verse 1: "Some time later," or in other translations, "after these things." This may refer to all that's happened with Abraham and Sarah, who have been wandering from place to place, following God's command, for the last 25 years. They are elderly, but they have recently been granted a miraculous son. Of course, this wasn't Abraham's only son, as he also fathered a son by his wife's servant, Hagar, but he sent Hagar and her son, Ishmael, away. So now Isaac *is* his only son – the one he waited for, the one who was a miracle, the one whom he loves.

But this phrase, "after these things," might also refer to the whole history of the world until now, and all that *God* has experienced: betrayal in the garden, the murder of a brother in the second generation, the escalation of violence to the point that the whole world must be flooded, the tower of Babel – God has experienced steady rejection and alienation since breathing life into the first human beings. So God is now trying out a new strategy: instead of directing God's blessing to the whole world, God has decided to funnel blessing through one man, Abraham, and through him, to the whole world for generations to come.

So if we look at this story from Abraham's perspective, it's a little bit crazy: God says, "Take your only son, Isaac, and go to the place I will show you, and offer him as a sacrifice on one of the mountains I will show you." "WHAT?!" We want to scream. "ARE YOU KIDDING? Why on earth would God test Abraham in THIS way?" This seems ridiculous. It seems to promote absent-minded obedience that could lead to violence, especially violence against children in the name of religion. And that is *not* something we want to see from our God, the God we want to believe is full of grace and love.

But if we look at the story from God's perspective, too, it takes on a whole new dimension. God has tried to be in covenant relationship with God's people since the first man and woman were created, and that old kicker of "free will" keeps foiling God's plan for the people's prosperity. People keep messing things up, so God says, "Okay, I'll try something new – I'll put everything in Abraham's hands." In doing this, God is *completely vulnerable*. God is putting all of creation on the line in this one man, and we see in this story that before Abraham follows God's command on the mountain, God *does not know* if Abraham fully trusts God. God *does not know* if Abraham will be obedient to God, because Abraham has the free will at any time to turn to selfishness and leave God behind, just like every other generation has done.

So this test, this horrible test, is not designed to teach Abraham a lesson, as we might initially interpret it: it's not some dark plot designed by a sinister deity who's laughing at Abraham's anguish: this test is designed to confirm something for God, something God doesn't know yet. And it's not just designed to satisfy God's curiosity – but with an eye toward a much larger divine purpose, which is the blessing of multitudes in the generations to come.

But here's the thing: the testing only comes in the midst of relationship. It's not legalistic testing; it's relational. Abraham obeys because he trusts. He has no reason *not* to. When Abraham tells Isaac that God will provide, Abraham has no idea *how* God will provide, or if God's provision might indeed be Abraham's beloved son. But Abraham has every reason to trust God, because they are in relationship with one another, and God has proved Godself trustworthy again and again, even to the point of giving Abraham and Sarah a miraculous, beloved son when they are quite elderly. Abraham obeys because he trusts. And in trusting, he obeys. None of this would be possible outside the context of their relationship.

It's a serious, serious text. It's a crazy story, but an important one, one we cannot throw away. For one thing, as Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann has noted, "Only now [in reading *this* story] do we see how serious faith is."<sup>1</sup> The crux of this story, and of the issues we have with it, are that God provides both this terribly dark command to Abraham, *and* the high promise of the greatest blessing. Abraham's faith says "yes" to both the command and the promise. And that is something that we Christians struggle with in our relationship with God, and in our relationships with other people.

We are reminded here that God isn't just one who makes promises. God is not the cosmic vending machine: if we put the right prayer or practice in, we get what we want in return. God isn't just hanging out in heaven doling out prizes as God sees fit, or tossing blessings around at random. But God also isn't a slave-driver, cracking the divine whip indiscriminately, telling us what to do without reason or release. God makes both promises and demands. And being a Christian means both receiving the promises: of comfort and love and grace and constant companionship;

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<sup>1</sup> Brueggemann, *Genesis (Interpretation)*, (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 185.

*and* obeying the commands: to live a certain way, to love others, to put loyalty to God above all else.

Both the testing and the providing can be difficult for us to accept, depending on where we are in the spiritual life; and neither is necessarily reasonable, which is tough for the more cerebral among us to grasp. But our relationship with God is incomplete if we don't accept what God provides – if we don't believe that God has promises for us that are beyond our imagining and that God will hold true to those promises, whether we deserve it or not. And our relationship with God is incomplete if we don't accept the testing – if we don't believe that God asks something of us, that faith is more difficult than being spoon-fed a bunch of blessings.

Maybe it makes more sense if we think about it in terms of relationships with other people. And since it's father's day, we'll use that as an example: what kind of father would just order his son or daughter around all the time, without taking breaks, without giving rest, without reason, constantly testing his child's loyalty without building a relationship of trust? We would easily say, "that is no father at all." But what kind of father asks nothing of his son or daughter, and only gives his child what he or she wants day after day, year after year, never expecting anything, never receiving anything from the child? We would say that is no father, either. There is no relationship in either of those circumstances, no reciprocal giving and receiving – there is no trust; only blind obedience or cowardly overindulgence.

What we want for the fathers in our lives, and the mothers, and the children, the aunts, the uncles, the teachers, the mentors – is relationship. And relationships require giving and receiving: testing and promise, obedience and blessing. The God who led Abraham up the mountain with Isaac, and who provided for Abraham in a time of need, is our God, too, the God of relationship, the God who wants the best *for* us and *from* us, and who longs to earn our trust so that we might obey, too, and through that obedience, receive greater blessing than we could ever imagine.

Amen.