
¹ After these things God tested Abraham... ¹⁴ And the LORD said, “Do not lay a hand on the boy or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God.”

From Genesis 22:1-14

What are you like when it comes to packing for going away on a holiday or a camping trip? Are you one of those people who begins planning well before the journey, working out a clear itinerary and what you need? Do you lay things out well beforehand, ensuring that you have not only what you believe you need, but also what you might need if something goes wrong? Or are you more of a ‘last minute’ type person? Are you happy to ‘take the chance’ and trust that if you have forgotten something, you can get it on the way? Are you also open to simply having a basic outline of where you will go, and happy to make discoveries along the way?

As you think about your approach to ‘holiday’s and the like, does this in some way reflect you approach to life? Are you a ‘planner’? Do you get upset when others aren’t clear in their plans? Or are you one who wished that people wouldn’t be so restrictive in their plans (perhaps for you) and they would trust you a little more, and let you have a little more freedom? What is your ‘approach’ to ‘life’? How would you summarise it? How do you think other people around you may see it (and your ‘self’)?

There are also times in our lives where we may not only question our own ‘plans’, or the ‘approaches to life’ that others have around us... but where we also question God’s ‘plans’ for us. We may well know verses such as 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.”). But there are times when we certainly wonder what God’s plans are for us.

When we come to the Bible Reading for this day (Genesis 22:1-14) we may certainly have many questions. At an immediate level we may have wondered what was going through the mind of Abraham. Try to imagine his conversation with Sarah. What would he say? “So, Sarah, I’m taking Isaac away for a few days for a camping trip.” And what could he have been planning in terms of how he would explain returning without Isaac? “Terrible accident with a) fall off the mountain, b) wild beast got him, c) well, actually God said...” Was he worried, anxious, or so profoundly trusting in God and willingly obedient?

Think about Sarah. Did she know about this plan before or after? Given her actions to rid Abraham of Ishmael and clear the path for Isaac, we can only imagine the scene if the sacrifice had taken place.

This universally known story of Abraham's almost-sacrifice of Isaac as a test of obedience to God, is pretty horrifying on its face. The story of the 'testing' of Abraham is a story that makes us want to question not only human nature, but the nature of God Himself. In Sunday School stores Abraham is presented as a great model of obedience and faith. But, as we get older, we have got to ask a number of questions. First of all, what sort of 'god' would call upon any person to go out and sacrifice his 'one dear son'? Second, what sort of parent would go along with some 'god' who seemed to demand such a violent death?

If we look at the story of the testing of Abraham in the call to sacrifice Isaac, we are left with many questions. First, what about this 'God' who called for the death of a child? In order to answer this question, some Bible scholars have said we need to look at the time in which Abraham lived – now more than 4,000 years ago. That's a very long time, and the world was a much different place. It is also suggested that at this time it was not uncommon in many religious groups to have both human sacrifice and child sacrifice (cf. Lev. 18:21; 20:2-5). Certainly in other cultures, there have been various groups have been identified who practiced human sacrifice, and who left behind the infants and the weak. We also need to remember that at time of Abraham there was no written law – people relied on either direct revelation, or the passing on of 'sacred story' to know the truth. And so it is said by some that the story of Abraham and Isaac is a 'sacred story' that says it is wrong to offer people as sacrifices, but the sacrifices must be animal sacrifices.

But on one side this explanation is not entirely satisfactory. The 'internal evidence' (that is, what the Bible actually says) does not entirely support this point of view. No where is it mentioned along the lines 'This is why you shall not offer humans as sacrifices', nor is there any references to human sacrifices occurring elsewhere.

This is why others have mentioned that the Abraham-Isaac story has another meaning. Here we need to remember when the 'Torah' (that is, the first five books of the Bible) were first brought together. It was in the time of Moses (some 500 years after Abraham). And what did Moses and the priests and the Levites do in the 40year wandering to occupy their time? They brought together the 'sacred stories' into a written form. We also need to remember what God's people were like in this 40 year wandering; they weren't entirely obedient (which is why, in the first place, they got to wander for 40 years, and not 40 days). Therefore, Abraham is seen as a person who once was formerly disobedient (remember, he didn't have just 'one son' as Genesis 22:1 says – there was Ishmael as well. The readers need to remember this). Also, whilst in Egypt (Genesis 11) Abraham pretends that Sarah is his sister and not his wife so that a Pharaoh would treat him well (give him gifts in order to maybe get Sarah as a wife) rather than face the possibility of a jealous Pharaoh killing him to get the woman. Abraham doubted that God would protect him. But now we have an obedient Abraham. God's people are to be obedient too.

But again we are left with questions about what sort of 'God' could demand such a sacrifice. Even if God did not mean for the boy to die at the end, what about the emotional turmoil along the way for father and 'the only son'?

Taking up the 'only son imagery' other Bible scholars have suggested we need to understand the Abraham/ Isaac story 'typologically'. What does this 'typology' mean? Well, Abraham and Isaac are to be seen as a 'type' or a pattern of God the Father and God the Son. A father is about to offer his son to show his love for God, and the son was willing to go along with this. Of course, this father did not suffer the death of his 'one dear son' (after all, he had another son already, and was to have more later with another wife after Sarah died). But what did God the Father do? He gave up His 'one and only Son' (Jn.3:16). Further, this Son – Jesus – was Himself willing to die to bring about new life for us all. And all the other animal sacrifices of old were pointing to Jesus (Heb.9) which is why we don't have animal sacrifices any more because 'Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people' (Heb.9:28).

Of course, maybe there is truth in taking all of these explanations (that is: refuting human sacrifices, a call to obedience, and pointing to Christ's once-for-all sacrifice). But there is another set of questions as well: what about Abraham who goes along with it all? Would you even do part of some of the things he did? Would you go on a journey? Would you take the wood? Would you bind your child? We may also ask why Abraham didn't ask God about why he was called to kill his son...

But here the writer to the Hebrews says that Abraham serves as a great example of faith. He says (Hebrews 11:17, 19): "By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice... Abraham reasoned that God could raise him from the dead..."

In the end, we are still left with as many questions as possible answers. But maybe that is the point. How often have asked in one way or another: What is it about human nature that on the one hand we can celebrate life, but on the other hand there can be such a darkness and violent rage? There is so much for which we don't have specific 'answers' into specific situations. Can you always 'explain' why you do what you do? And yet at the same time we also know there are global truths we are to recognise.

Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac is one of those passages in Scripture that will always remain somewhat opaque; I doubt that any interpretation will fully satisfy us. It provokes so many questions. And every day we are beset with perplexing questions: Why do natural disasters kill so many people? Why are hatred and terrorism such dire threats in our world? Why are economic forces beyond our control forcing us to cut back, go without, or cause others to lose jobs and be hungry? These may not be as personalised as Abraham's test with Isaac, but they are tests nevertheless. And God does want to know where we stand. God has chosen us.

In the text for today, the key line is this: “Don’t you touch that boy Abraham. For now I see that you fear Me above all things.” In this text, God is inviting us to have a ‘fear’ like Abraham did, a deep inner awareness of the awesome power of God, like we feel when we are way out in the ocean in a boat when the waves are starting to swell. And all this should lead us to an important question: Have you ever thought what might have happened if Abraham was not ‘listening’ to God?

Sometimes people want ‘simple answers’ to the problems and situations in life. But deep down we know that ‘simple’ and ‘neat’ answers don’t work. Who would want a ‘simple’ and ‘neat’ answer to describe who they are? And as we think about the world in which we live, with an amazing and complicated universe, and with every person an incredibly unique individual, we know that trying to fit people into ‘boxes’ is not God’s call for us. Instead, we are to rejoice in the mystery of life, just as we rejoice in the mystery of God’s love as revealed in the person of Jesus, the Christ.

The reality is that we live in a different time and a different place to Abraham. We now have God’s written Law. And we now know the fullness of the revelation of God in Jesus’ death and resurrection. And so in the face of the challenges of life, and the trials and troubles of this world, we are called to trust God and His love – a love revealed for us in Jesus. There is hope for every day. We truly ‘live by faith’ because we know of what God has done for us in Jesus. Amen.