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## The Journey of Faith: God Will Provide

1 Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied.

2 Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you."

3 Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. 4 On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. 5 He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you."

6 Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, 7 Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?"

"Yes, my son?" Abraham replied.

"The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

8 Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together.

9 When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. 10 Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. 11 But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied.

12 "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."

13 Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. 14 So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided."

15 The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time 16 and said, "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, 17 I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, 18 and through your offspring[b] all nations on earth will be blessed,[c] because you have obeyed me."

19 Then Abraham returned to his servants, and they set off together for Beersheba. And Abraham stayed in Beersheba. (Genesis 22:1-19)

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31 He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. 32 He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

33 But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

34 Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. 36 What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? 37 Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? 38 If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."  
(Mark 8:31-39)

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## Intro

The story of the sacrifice of Isaac is a powerful one, and one of the most troubling and inspiring in the whole Bible. I want to draw out four lessons, briefly, for us this morning, concerning the spiritual journey, the condition of the human heart, the character of God, and finally the work of Christ.

## Trust

The life of faith is a life of trust. We have seen in Genesis that sometimes Abraham trusts God, and at other times trusts only in himself. When Abraham trusts God, he does very well. When Abraham trusts only in himself, the results are poor, but not catastrophic.

Isaac is the child of promise. Abraham and Sarah waited for 25 years for the birth of Isaac. You can well imagine how much Isaac must have meant to them. And yet, I can also imagine something going slightly wrong there as well.

Once Isaac was born, there may have been a temptation to hold onto Isaac as the fulfillment of the promise. Holding on in such a way that Abraham and Sarah would not have to trust God again. "We got what we came for, thank you very much."

It is human nature, I suppose, to trust while in times of crisis, and then to consolidate the gains. When I was having hip replacement surgery earlier in the year, I found my trust level very high. I trusted God for a good outcome, and I also trusted the surgeon, and the Physical Therapist, and anyone else involved in the surgeries. And yet, the further away from that event I get, I have reverted not exactly into distrust, but my trust is not on high alert.

For Abraham to be called to sacrifice Isaac is to force him to examine what and who he trusts. I am amazed that Abraham uttered not a peep of protest, nor did he ask, "Why?" As a kid, I loved asking the "Why?" questions. And I still do. I want to understand why I am supposed to do what I have been asked to do. And yet, Abraham never asks "Why?"

Hebrews 11 sums up this episode this way:

17 By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, 18 even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." 19 Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death. (Hebrews 11:17-19)

Isaac was born of a promise. God asked for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. So, Abraham figured, God would do something to keep his promise to make a great nation out of Isaac and to bless the nations through Isaac. Abraham did not have it all figured out, but he trusted God.

So the spiritual journey is not just a one time event of trusting in God, it is a daily, even perhaps an hourly event.

## **Idols**

Presbyterian pastor Tim Keller has written that one of the tensions in the story of the Bible is between faith and idols.

He writes in his book, *Counterfeit Gods*, "The human heart takes good things like a successful career, love, material possessions, even family, and turns them into ultimate things. Our hearts deify them as the center of our lives, because, we think, they can give us significance and security, safety and fulfillment, if we attain them." Thus anything can be an idol and, really, everything has been an idol to one person or another. The great deception of idols is we are prone to think that idols are only bad things. But evil is far more subtle than this. "We think that idols are bad things, but that is almost never the case. The greater the good, the more likely we are to expect that it can satisfy our deepest needs and hopes. Anything can serve as a counterfeit god, especially the very best things in life."

What then is an idol? "It is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything

you seek to give you what only God can give.” If anything in all the world is more fundamental than God to your happiness, to your meaning in life, then that thing has become an idol. It has supplanted God in your heart and in your affections. You will pursue that thing with an abandon and intensity that should be reserved for God alone. (Tim Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, reviewed by Tim Challies, <http://www.challies.com/book-reviews/book-review-counterfeit-gods-by-tim-keller>)

You can easily see, through this lens, how Isaac may have become an idol to Abraham. A precious child, born in his old age, with the promise to become a great nation and to bless the world! I think Abraham must have loved Isaac with his whole heart, and rightly so. And yet, the tension is between trusting in Isaac or in trusting the one who promised Isaac and fulfilled the promise.

Keller points out that we can make anything into an idol, and that human beings are little idol makers. Religious people are especially prone to making idols. Remember the Golden Calf story in Exodus? We can make a ministry an idol, so that the ministry is more important to us than God. We can make the church an idol, so that the preservation of the church is more important to us than loving God. We can make our jobs an idol, so that they are more important to us than God. We can make money an idol, spending untold hours pondering it every day, when the market is up we are happy, when the market is down we are unhappy, and money is more important than God.

How does one tell if something is an idol? Simply try to leave it. Try giving away money, substantial amounts of money. If you cannot do it, money may be an idol. Try honoring your hours at work. Instead of working 60 hours per week, try keeping it to 40. Try to leave at 5:00 p.m. each day. If you cannot, perhaps work is an idol. How about saying “no” to your children or grandchildren. If you cannot say “no”, if you feel compelled to do what they ask “or else”, perhaps they have turned into an idol.

Some have speculated that Isaac had become an idol for Abraham, and God’s harsh command was God’s way of forcing Abraham to face that, and to return to his first love. Without Isaac, God would still be God, and all the promises would be there. But without God, Isaac would not be Isaac, and all would be lost for Abraham.

Jesus’ words in Mark 8 ring true: “For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.” We cannot save ourselves. Our idols cannot save us.

I have seen this time and again in families. Sons and daughters begin to gain some independence, and fathers and mothers clamp down more firmly. Of course, they parents clamp down out of love and concern, but they are really driving their children away. And the tighter the parents squeeze, the less control they have over their growing children. There is a time for shaping and discipline, of course, and there is also a time for setting free. The more we wish to save our lives, we will lose them. And if we lose our lives, lose our idols, lose our control, we will gain our lives back.

Do you have anything in your life that could be an idol? Ask God to reveal that to you, so that you can break free from the dominion of that idol and enjoy the freedom of worshiping the living God.

## **Provision**

Biblical scholars have pointed out that verse 8 is the central verse in this story. When Isaac asked where the ram was for the sacrifice,

8 Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together.

As Abraham lays Isaac on the altar, and is stopped by the angel of the Lord, Abraham looks up to see a ram caught in a bush. And so Abraham sacrificed the substitute, the ram for Isaac, and called the place "The Lord Will Provide".

Do you know this today, that they Lord will provide? Especially in difficult economic times, it is hard to see how this will happen sometimes, don't we? But this is God's promise to Abraham, and to us, Abraham's children.

At my former church in Los Angeles, we were faced with a daunting task. Not only were we in a neighborhood where we were the outsiders, and didn't speak the language, not only was the church in decline for decades, not only had the church dismissed the previous pastor on a congregational vote of 54-51, but the sanctuary was yellow-tagged after the 1994 Northridge earthquake. We were forbidden to use it. And we were under orders from Division 88 of the Los Angeles Building and Safety Department to seismically retrofit the building.

And so, we wrestled long and hard about that decision. We prayed. We debated. We argued. We got angry with each other. We felt extreme sadness together. And yet, we went ahead with the retrofit, not having the

million dollars in the bank, and not knowing exactly where it would come from. We believed that God would provide.

And so we sold the church manse, which had been a revenue stream for us, but we needed the influx of cash. We did a small capital campaign. We applied for grants. We asked the congregation to leave money to the church in their wills. We applied for a PILP loan from Louisville. In the end, God provided.

At one point in our process, a woman stopped by the church one afternoon and asked if she could give us a million dollars. My jaw dropped. She seemed legit. She dressed nicely. She drove a nice car. Her story sounded feasible. And yet, the more we checked out her story, the fishier it got. When we asked her for some earnest money, \$10,000 for building permits, she balked. Eventually, she just disappeared, without giving a cent to the project.

I only tell you that to tell you this: if she had given a million dollars, I would have been very grateful, but I also would not have learned much about God's provision. Sometimes, it is through the pain and the agony of trusting God that God's provision shows up.

Many years ago, Beth was working in Evansville, Indiana, and I was in Walnut Creek, California. We were writing letters and making phone calls to each other, and we felt that we were at a crossroads in our relationship. We really wanted to, and needed to, see one another face to face. And yet, neither of us had the finances.

I let this be known to my small group at church, and to several friends. And one morning, leaving for work, I discovered an envelope in my mailbox. In that envelope were two things: one, the exact amount of money, in cash, for a plane ticket to Evansville, and two a note which read, "Go see Beth." None of my friends fessed up to placing that money there. But Beth and I were very grateful, and remain grateful, at their generosity to us. God provided, not in a way either of us would have expected, but we knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that God had provided.

God's provision is miraculous and ordinary. But it is always in the crucible of trust. God is more ready to provide for us than we are to either ask for it or receive it.

Abraham's lesson is one we could all learn, and be reminded of, God will provide. What are you hoping God will provide you today? Trust God, as Abraham did.

## Christ

The majority of Christian Biblical commentators hold this whole episode to be an archetype of the way that God works; this event is seen as prefiguring God's plan to have his own Son, Jesus, die on the cross as a substitute for humanity, much like the ram God provided for Abraham. And Abraham's willingness to give up his own son Isaac is seen, in this view, as foreshadowing the willingness of God the Father to sacrifice his Son; also contrasted is Isaac's submission in the whole ordeal with Christ's, the two choosing to lay down their own lives in order for the will of God to be accomplished, as no struggle is mentioned in the Genesis account. Indeed, both stories portray the participants carrying the wood for their own sacrifice up a mountain.

If Abraham showed his devotion to God in obediently sacrificing his own son, whom he loved, then God has show his love and devotion to us by sacrificing his own son, whom he loved.

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 John 4:9-10)

This morning, as we prepare our hearts for communion, know that you are deeply loved by God and that God will provide, you can trust Him.