

# “What Price Trust?”

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Scripture: Genesis 22:1-14; Matthew 10:40-42

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How many of you feel uncomfortable when you hear that story about Abraham and Isaac? Does it bother you that God would ask that of Abraham? You're not alone in feeling that way. For centuries scholars and commentators and other believers have struggled with that story. A lot of the time we're inclined to think of it as a sort of biblical eccentricity. That allows us to dismiss it and not take it too much to heart. Another way of dealing with it is to treat it like an explanatory story. For a long time it was common to use this story as a way of showing that God disapproves of human sacrifice. But there's really nothing in the story itself to support that. There's plenty in other parts of the Bible to show that, but this story doesn't really speak to it.

It is a dark story; one of the strangest in the Bible. But it isn't an aside, an eccentricity. And it doesn't really teach a lesson or have a moral. It's a vignette: A recounting of one of the encounters between God and Abraham that somehow shapes their relationship. It shapes the relationship between Abraham and God and, by extension, between God and all of God's people, between God and us.

Just when everything seemed to be in place to fulfill the promise God made to Abraham all those many years before, suddenly, out of nowhere, God calls Abraham and commands him to do something that will completely destroy everything. We're told this is a test. But we have to be a little careful about that. Because I have to tell you something: when I hear that God is interested in testing folks by ordering them to do heinous things, I start to think twice about serving a God like that. What sort of God would, on a whim, test someone in this way? Only a cruel, unfeeling god would do such a thing.

And what exactly is it that God is testing anyway? Is there some question about Abraham's obedience? This is the same Abraham who jumped when God called him to leave his country and everything he once knew behind on the strength of some vague promise of offspring. And when that promise dangled out there for years and years, Abraham never decided to call it off. He continued to obey even when it seemed that God would never come through. It seems odd to me that God would be concerned about Abraham's obedience.

Think about the God whom you have come to know. Have you experienced God as cruel and unfeeling? Is the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ, full of compassion and abounding in steadfast love, is that God capable of ordering such a horrible thing of Abraham on a lark? There is something more going on here than a mere test. Everything we know about God, everything we have experienced of God should tell us this is not just a test for God's amusement.

In his commentary on Genesis, Walter Brueggemann points out that something happens to God in the course of this story. At the beginning God has a question and at the end we hear God say, "Now I know." And the fulcrum, the hinge on which this knowledge turns occurs not with Abraham's setting out with Isaac or even at the moment when Abraham is about to carry out God's horrible command. It occurs on the way in the conversation between Abraham and his son. Innocently, Isaac turns to his father and asks, "Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" And rather than break down and cry or turn, grab the child and run the other way, Abraham says, "The Lord will provide the lamb, my son."

Abraham knows God better than anyone ever could. He knows that God will not put a stop to the promise. He puts his trust in that, even in the face of circumstances that will surely put an end to

everything God had started. Abraham has a deep connection to God. He has reached a point in his journey with God where he can trust at any price. He's not a fatalist. He doesn't say, "Easy come, easy go." He trusts that God will remain true, steadfast, no matter how puzzling a turn his life with God might take.

It is this trust that God is seeking. Trust comes at a high cost. Think about your own relationships. Think how fragile trust can be in them. For some one betrayal, one hint of falsehood and trust evaporates. We live in a society that does all it can to avoid relying on trusting relationships. We get everything in writing; we want contracts and signatures. Some say ours is the most litigious society in the world because, I suspect, we are so untrusting of one another.

But God offers no contracts. All God offers is God's word. And all God asks is our willingness to trust. But trust takes time. For Abraham it took decades of walking with God, of listening and following. If the promise of offspring, made so many years before, had been fulfilled right away, Abraham would never have had the courage to respond to God's command. He would have argued or run away. He would have thought his future was his to protect even from its Author.

But the years of following God had shaped him. Just as when we determine to listen for and follow God's voice in our own lives, we will be shaped. That's the true purpose of the spiritual life. It is meant to shape us, to make us more and more in the image of Christ. I've been reading a book recently by the spiritual teacher Evelyn Underhill. She wrote and taught in the early half of the twentieth century. This book is called *The Spiritual Life* and was published around 1937. She defines the spiritual life this way: "[It] is simply a life in which all that we do comes from the center, where we are anchored in God: a life soaked through and through by a sense of [God's] reality and claim, and self-given to the great movement of [God's] will."

"All that we do comes from the center." When we are "anchored in God," we discover that trusting God, no matter how disappointing or precarious our life might become, defines our response to every circumstance. Getting to that point is seldom a journey that runs in a straight line. It wasn't for Abraham, and it probably hasn't been for any of you. And strangely enough it isn't that way for all of us collectively either. I think Underhill's definition applies to congregations just as well as it does to individuals. Congregations have to learn to trust. Sometimes our finances, or our membership roles, or our worship attendance can be a source of anxiety and fear in the church.

Just like individuals in relationship with God, we as a congregation are in a relationship that requires our attention to listen for God's voice among us. It requires our willingness to look back over the long years of history we share with God as a church. We look back so that we can look forward fearlessly, trustingly, knowing that the God who has led us to where we are now will not forsake us when things become difficult or dicey. We can trust that the God who called this church into being is the same God who walks with us now, calling us to serve and to follow even when we have no way of knowing what the result will be or where our destination lies.

And there will be times when the story will disturb us, when we'll be shocked by what God calls us to do. There will times when the price God asks of us will seem far too steep to consider. But if we are truly walking this journey, truly being shaped in the spiritual life, we'll face whatever is asked of us with confidence, trusting with Abraham that God will provide.

Amen