

## Genesis 22:1 – 24

<sup>1</sup> Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, ‘Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ <sup>2</sup> He said, ‘Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.’ <sup>3</sup> So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. <sup>4</sup> On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from a distance. <sup>5</sup> Abraham said to his young men, ‘Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go over there; and we will worship and return to you.’ <sup>6</sup> 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 the two of them walked on together. <sup>7</sup> Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, ‘My father!’ And he said, ‘Here I am, my son.’ And he said, ‘Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?’ <sup>8</sup> Abraham said, ‘God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.’ So the two of them walked on together. <sup>9</sup> Then they came to the place of which God had told him; and Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood, and bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. <sup>10</sup> Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. <sup>11</sup> But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, ‘Abraham, Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ <sup>12</sup> He said, ‘Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.’ <sup>13</sup> Then Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up for a burnt offering in the place of his son. <sup>14</sup> Abraham called the name of that place The LORD Will Provide, as it is said to this day, ‘In the mount of the LORD it will be provided.’ <sup>15</sup> Then the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, <sup>16</sup> and said, ‘By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, <sup>17</sup> indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. <sup>18</sup> In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.’ <sup>19</sup> So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham lived at Beersheba. <sup>20</sup> Now it came about after these things, that it was told Abraham, saying, ‘Behold, Milcah also has borne children to your brother Nahor: <sup>21</sup> Uz his firstborn and Buz his brother and Kemuel the father of Aram <sup>22</sup> and Chesed and Hazo and Pildash and Jidlaph and Bethuel.’ <sup>23</sup> Bethuel became the father of Rebekah; these eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham’s brother. <sup>24</sup> His concubine, whose name was Reumah, also bore Tebah and Gaham and Tahash and Maacah.

### Historical and Cultural Background:

- *Mockery*: Recall the expulsion of Ishmael and Hagar. Ishmael as a teenager mocked Isaac and/or Sarah when a 93 year old Sarah was weaning the 3 year old Isaac:

<sup>9</sup> Now Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking. <sup>10</sup> Therefore she said to Abraham, ‘Drive out this maid and her son, for the son of this maid shall not

be an heir with my son Isaac.’<sup>11</sup> The matter distressed Abraham greatly because of his son. (Gen.21:9 – 11).

- *Abraham’s Faith and Character:* Did Abraham simply seek to escape an awkward situation at home? Or did he trust that God would preserve the lives of Hagar and Ishmael?

<sup>12</sup> But God said to Abraham, ‘Do not be distressed because of the lad and your maid; whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her, for through Isaac your descendants shall be named.’<sup>13</sup> And of the son of the maid I will make a nation also, because he is your descendant.’<sup>14</sup> So Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar, putting them on her shoulder, and gave her the boy, and sent her away. And she departed and wandered about in the wilderness of Beersheba.<sup>15</sup> When the water in the skin was used up, she left the boy under one of the bushes.<sup>16</sup> Then she went and sat down opposite him, about a bowshot away, for she said, ‘Do not let me see the boy die.’ And she sat opposite him, and lifted up her voice and wept. (Gen.21:9 – 17)

- *Mount Moriah:* The much later biblical *Book of Chronicles* identifies Mount Moriah with the site of the Jerusalem Temple (2 Chr.3:1).

## Questions

1. What are your initial impressions of this story?
  - a. This is crazy! Why, God?!?
  - b. What is Abraham thinking and feeling throughout this story? What about Sarah? Isaac?
  - c. Danish Christian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard called this episode a 'suspension of the ethical.' He thought God could command us to do something unethical or against God's own ethics. Kierkegaard believed that this story should be compared to that of Agamemnon. Agamemnon believed that he needed to sacrifice his daughter in order to fulfill his public role, of launching the fleet. He had a moral duty as a father and as leader of the army. Abraham, however, is another case. It is not a moral dilemma, according to Kierkegaard. There is no ethical principle that overrides his love for his son. It's just because God required proof that Abraham loved God more than Isaac. Was Kierkegaard right? No: Kierkegaard disconnected Genesis 22 from the rest of the narrative of Genesis. (Credit to Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) for inspiring this study, and offering a decisive refutation of Kierkegaard)
  - d. Why do you think there is no emotional language, in this story that is so emotional?
    - i. To help us puzzle over the story
    - ii. To help us both enter the story and also keep a distance from it
2. God tested Abraham (v.1). Didn't God know whether Abraham would indeed do this thing? Notice that there are lots of other passages in Scripture which raise this question. See <http://newhumanityinstitute.org/pdfs/article-sovereignty-of-god's-word.pdf> for more information. Possibly. There are two main options about Abraham:
  - a. God did see into Abraham's heart and knew what He would do. So the 'testing' is to help him work out in actual practice something that needed to be refined and would be refined by Abraham's actual choice. Although this could explain this particular text, if you read the pdf document above, notice that this would not explain the many other passages.
  - b. God did not know what Abraham would do. My belief is that God knows all possible futures, but not 'the only future' because He is committed to our free will, and to giving us actual choices.
    - i. Logically speaking, God is omnibenevolent (all loving) *before* He is omniscient (all knowing) and omnipotent (all powerful). He is not capable of doing something that is against His love. Neither is He capable of knowing the future in a way that is against His love. This is not a limitation on God's part, because God's perfection is found in being fully loving. In mathematics, you cannot maximize two variables at once. You have to select maximize one variable first, and then maximize the other variable relative to the first. The same holds true with the 'omnis' of God.
    - ii. The most important place where we need to be clear is the fall. Did God know that Adam and Eve would fall? If He did, that would mean their free will was not genuine. It would also implicate God in human evil and sin. So at least on that point, God's foreknowledge must have seen both possibilities, but not the fact of the fall.
3. Why does God say, 'Your only son, whom you love?' (22:2) Didn't Abraham love Ishmael, too? He did (21:11). Is it fair for God to ask Abraham to give up Isaac, after giving up Ishmael, too?
  - a. Even though God is asking Abraham and Sarah to consider this act with Isaac, God is also bringing to mind the past incident with Ishmael. What happened there?
  - b. Was Sarah motivated by goodness when she wanted to throw out Ishmael and Hagar? No! Sarah was angry and she wanted a murderous revenge. That Abraham goes along with Sarah is testimony that Sarah's wrath is virulent and intense. The thing was very grievous to Abraham. So this was not a moral dilemma for Abraham: It was very clear what he should do. But at this point, God breaks the deadlock, by siding with Sarah!!
  - c. How can God tell Abraham to side with Sarah when her motives are so evil? It's because God agrees with the outcome, but not Sarah's motive. And God ensures not just Ishmael's safety, but even more, his flourishing. God promises that the boy Ishmael won't die; instead, he will be the father of a whole people. God's promise relieves Abraham of the evil of conspiring to kill his son; it also relieves Abraham of betraying his son's trust because God Himself is guaranteeing Ishmael's thriving.
  - d. Why didn't Abraham disagree with God, or negotiate, as he did with Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen.19)? What clues do we have in Gen.21 about how Abraham thought about God? There's

not a clue. Abraham attempted no negotiations with God, though he did negotiate with God over Sodom and Gomorrah; nor did he provide a servant and animals for Hagar though he will provide a servant and animals for Isaac's wife Rebekah. There's something distressing about Abraham's readiness to acquiesce to Sarah.

- e. If Abraham had any doubts that God might not care for Ishmael and Hagar, what would or should he have done back in Genesis 21? Kept them close and in the camp!
  - f. But since Abraham sent them off into the wilderness, and the narrator doesn't tell us what Abraham's theological understanding is, we are left to question. Was Abraham guilty of having conspired against Ishmael by taking the easy route? Was he just self-interested and relieved to give into Sarah using the 'God told me so' excuse? If that were true, Abraham would be incriminating God, as if God doesn't so much mind being an accessory to serious evil. So it is important what Abraham's theology is.
  - g. Any clues as to how old Isaac is? Isaac is still deferential to his father, so he's young. But he's also big enough to carry a load of wood up the hill. Possibly the same age that Ishmael was when Ishmael was sent into the wilderness. Furthermore, God reminds Abraham of Ishmael, not just Isaac. 'Your only son'? If you had abandoned one son in the wilderness, would you be reminded that your second son was 'your only son'? Who would you think of? Here, Abraham is being reminded of Ishmael, too! What made it morally permissible for Abraham to accept the abandonment of Ishmael was his unwavering conviction that God is good. It was only Abraham's belief in God's goodness and God's trustworthiness of God's promise that prevented him from committing a terrible wrong against his child. Now, that same belief is being clarified for us.
  - h. If you were Ishmael, wouldn't you think that Abraham had this trial coming to him? If he NOW in Genesis 22 finds that he pauses, doubts God's character, then what will we think looking back on how he dealt with Ishmael? Won't we think it was a facile excuse for doing a great moral wrong because it made his life easier? Using religion or 'God talk' as a means to a disgusting moral act. From God's standpoint, this is refinement. Abraham's options are:
    - i. To refuse to participate
    - ii. To sacrifice Isaac, believing that a trustworthy God has promised that Isaac will be the father of a great nation.
  - i. God *must* therefore test Abraham.
4. What was the first father-son relationship we saw? Cain and Enoch, in Genesis 4. After he killed Abel and corrupted the land for himself, Cain didn't want to trust God and wander. So he built a city and named it after his son. Implicitly, he rebelled against God by making his son farm for him, defend him, justify him, etc. Whereas God had said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother,' Cain prevented Enoch from leaving him. Thus began the rule of the father over the son, the older generation over the younger in a direction away from God.
- a. Both Ishmael and Isaac are gifts from God and not possessions of Abraham
  - b. Both sons are also men who God wants to use to bless the world. Abraham cannot control them, and make them serve his personal, private sense of family, or name-building.
  - c. In order for this to happen, Abraham must believe in more than God's existence. What else has he already believed about God?
    - i. God keeps His promises. God's word is trustworthy in this sense. And God will still bring about a whole new people out of Isaac, as He promised.
    - ii. God can bring life out of death. Abraham and Sarah both believed that God would give them a baby even though they were 100 and 90 years old, respectively.
    - iii. This is what we are still called to believe about God. Not just that He exists, but that He keeps His promises and brings forth life out of death!!
  - d. This context makes it clear that there is a morally acceptable reason why God would test Abraham. God must learn whether Abraham is willing to sacrifice Isaac as he did Ishmael. To be fair, God must ask of Abraham to give up his second son like the first. On the other hand, Abraham must demonstrate his belief that God is true to His word and is capable of bringing life out of death. He had seen God do that with Isaac's birth from parents who were reproductively dead. He had also seen God do that with Ishmael and Hagar. So this test had to happen. Hence, Abraham becomes the father of faith. Faith is not merely about God's existence. Faith is a belief in the moral goodness of God, that God is true to His word, and that God brings life out of death.
5. Why does Abraham say that they will both worship and return in v.5?

- a. Maybe he's trying to cover up what he's going to do, but...
  - b. That is the evidence, I think, that Abraham trusts that God will raise Isaac from the dead.
6. What do you think Isaac thinks and feels?
  - a. Perhaps Abraham told Isaac what he intended?
  - b. After all, how could Abraham, as an old, old man restrain Isaac against his will?
  - c. Isaac must have trusted God as well, trusted that God would raise him from the dead.
7. What do you think Abraham is thinking and feeling when he's carrying out the act?
  - a. Why did God say 'your only son, whom you love'?
  - b. That reminds me of Ishmael, my other son. And the sacrifice of parting from Ishmael.
  - c. But God provided for Ishmael at Beersheba through the well of water. He saved Ishmael from dying
  - d. Maybe God will save Isaac from death itself, on the other side?
  - e. God has always been faithful to His word. Even if He has called me to kill Isaac, He must have a way of being faithful to His word.
  - f. Therefore, God must want to raise Isaac from the dead. He already brought him into life out of death, the death of my old body and Sarah's old body. This is not impossible for God, even if I burn Isaac's body and scatter his ashes.
  - g. 'By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; it was he to whom it was said, 'In Isaac your descendants shall be called.' He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type.' (Hebrews 11:17 – 19)
8. Why do you think Abraham calls the place 'The LORD will provide' as opposed to 'The LORD has provided'?
  - a. He seems to have an insight into God's will for resurrection, life out of death. God will provide a way to resurrect humanity, in fulfillment of His word of blessing and promise to Adam and Eve.
  - b. Abraham might even have a window of insight into the day God would ask of Israel as a whole to release their ultimate Son, the Messianic Son of God who embodied Israel.
9. Do you think Jesus read himself into the place of Isaac? Perhaps he drew on this story, to become a greater Isaac.
  - a. The ultimate descendant of Abraham and Sarah, the next generation of Isaac and Rebekah, is Jesus.
  - b. Jesus was the Son who carried the wood on which he would sacrifice himself.
  - c. On that day, Jesus walked on with his Father to kill the thing in himself that needed to be killed, not to narrowly escape death but to die personally, so that he would come back from the dead in cleansed, resurrection glory.
  - d. Jesus also trusted that his Father had the power to bring life out of his death. They were in agreement and did it together.
  - e. 'Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.' (Hebrews 12:1 – 2)
  - f. Recall that God wanted His people to bear His image and share His likeness. Abraham got to experience a little bit of what God the Father Himself experienced.
10. Why does Abraham go back to Beersheba (v.19)?
  - a. It's where he knows that God rescued Ishmael from death, where God provided a well of water
  - b. Perhaps it's a place where he could tell Isaac that God was faithful there as well. It's healing and calming?
11. Application:
  - a. Let's pull this back to us in the present. Jesus calls us to sacrifice parts of our lives that are dear to us. Love your enemy; sacrifice your self-protection, even though God has protected you. Love the person down the hall who annoys you; sacrifice your time and energy, even though God has given you time and energy. Stop trying to get romantic attention; sacrifice your desire to be special, even though God makes you special by His love. Stop trying to be the know-it-all; sacrifice your desire for knowledge because it's leading you to gossip, even though God has given you other people and friendships. Stop trying to obstruct other people from living out Jesus'

mission by keeping them close to you; sacrifice your right to others, even though God has given you rights. Jesus will deal with you on heart level issues like that. Jesus wants to sacrifice yourself to him because that is the only he can kill the thing in you that needs to be killed.

- b. Illus: My story of moving into East Palo Alto, CA to minister to Mexican immigrant families. I first gave up my name being an honorable thing. I would introduce myself to the kids and parents. The kids would laugh and the adults would look puzzled. I asked my mentors, Jose and Jennifer, about this. They said, 'Oh, it's because your name Mako is close to the word moco, which means boogers.' I asked if I should go by my full name, Makoto. They said, 'No, because in Spanish when you end a word with -ito, it means small; when you end a word with -oto, it means big. So Makoto is close to mocoto, which is *big boogers!*' Oh boy. Then, I gave up my safety. There was one night at 4.30am when I had left the window open because it was hot. I woke up to find someone climbing into my window and falling onto the floor. Some part of my brain was able to size him up: 5'7", 130 pounds; I can take him. But as I pulled him up, he said, 'Don't let them get me! Don't let them get me!' I immediately closed the window and the curtain. A few gang members had been coming after him and my window was the only place he saw. Then I gave up the appearance to my mom that I would live a life that she wanted. As a Japanese immigrant who had worked hard for me to 'lead a better life than her,' I was wasting my education (even though I was still working at Intel and ready to support her and my sister). I was an embarrassment and she couldn't tell her friends about me (how many mothers tell their friends where their adult sons *live?*) She disowned me for a month before I could go home and talk about it face to face with her. Although our relationship was patched up a bit, ever since then, she has not liked any of the major decisions I've made in life. Yet, despite all these things that I've given up, my life with Jesus has been so full...I would not have traded my choices for anything!
  - c. All of us in some way or another say this: 'Okay Jesus, I believe that you exist. But I don't want to do anything more with you. I don't want to trust you with my future. I don't want to trust you with my romantic hopes. I don't want to trust you with my time, my money, my future security, my direction in life, my love for others, my lack of love for others, my passions. I just want to acknowledge that you're real, so you can make me feel better about my life when I need a little pick me up.' But a full commitment to Jesus is an act of trust and dying to yourself to live with him. Jesus really does give us life and blessing. Not just for others but even for us. And not just for us, but even for others. On this side of your decision, it feels like a paradox, like how the sacrifice of Isaac might have felt to Abraham on one level. 'How can God ask me to give up the very thing that He wants to bless me through?' It's very simple. On the other side of that decision, Jesus will give you life. You can trust him.
  - d. Can we trust God even with the blessings He has given us, because God knows better how to bless the world than we do?
  - e. Where do we find it hard to trust God for what He has said to us?
12. (optional) What has God done to bring Abraham and Sarah closer to His original creation order?
- a. Know the power of God's word, that God can bring life out of nothing (death) by His word. He did that in the physical bodies of Abraham and Sarah. He provided life for Ishmael despite the threat of death in the wilderness, and for Isaac despite the threat of death on Mount Moriah.
  - b. Be the humans through whom God speaks. Abraham is called a prophet (Gen.20:7 and 17).
  - c. Know the sanctity of their marriage as husband and wife. God cut off Abraham's cultural and biological options outside of his marriage.
  - d. Know the significance of bearing children as the means of God bringing life to the world. Specifically, that Sarah is part of the prophecy of the 'seed of the woman.'
  - e. Know that God wants to use your children for His purpose of blessing the world. Therefore, Abraham and Sarah have to let go of their children.
  - f. Know God's heart for true brotherhood and sisterhood. Abraham demonstrated brotherhood with Lot. Sarah and Hagar demonstrated sisterhood with one another.
  - g. Know the original condition of worshiping God on a mountain. Abraham and Sarah set up an altar on a mountain (Gen.13:1 – 4); dwelt among trees; planted a tree near a well of water (Gen.21). Those are limited, temporary pictures of the original Eden.