

Part 23: Faith-Friend or Foe?

Tyler Velin | Genesis 22:1-20

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We love a good story about faith. We are inspired by those who show a dogged commitment to their trade, their skill, or their passion. And yet, we've seen how some faith carries people too far. George Mallory was driven by his successful summits of mountains in the past and praised for his zeal when it came to attacking Everest. Karl Wallenda had entertained thousands before as he confidently walked the tightrope between tall objects with no safety net.

These men were brave, fearless, and admirable. But in the end, their confidence did them in. A snowstorm on Everest swallowed up Mallory and he perished in the ice. Wallenda was on a tightrope between two hotel towers when a rogue gust of wind threw him off his line and to his death.

We have a healthy respect for faith, but we have also learned to keep it in check. Because, if we aren't careful, untested faith might do you in. History is full of these foolishly tragic stories where someone's absolute confidence ended up costing them everything. They made a statement, they followed their hope, but what did it cost them? Everything.

But on Resurrection Sunday, no one asks those questions do they? Jesus obeyed his Father, and faithfully trusted him to the end, even death on a cross. But on that third day, he rose from the dead. Jesus was seen by his disciples and by many others for 40 days after he was resurrected. They saw his body entirely restored, he had been raised to eternal, unending, perfect, joyful life for all eternity in glory and no one dared ask, "But what did it cost him?"

The cross showed us what his conviction cost him—it cost him everything. But the empty tomb shows us that he gained far more than he gave. In the end, it cost him nothing. That's a theology of Christian faith on paper. If only our experience was as black and white. There are times where even the most faithful Christian hesitates because of what faith asks of us. There are real moments in life where living out our faith seems like death itself. We see what the empty tomb meant for Jesus, but we wonder if it will be the same for us?

That's why the title of our sermon this morning is this: *Faith- Friend or Foe?*

Is faith the friend who we can trust all the way to the end, or will there be a time where faith actually shows itself to be the enemy of all your hopes and dreams?

As we look at Genesis 22, we see the paradox of living faith even when it seems faith means the death of hope. And our main point this morning is this: **Faith takes us further than we want but provides us more than we desire.** We are going to see this in three parts this morning. First we are going to see **The Big Ask** of faith, then we will see **The Brave Ascent** of faith, and finally **The Better Arrangement** of faith.

Notice how our passage today begins with this: **Genesis 22:1**, "After these things God tested Abraham."

Here is our first point this morning: **The Big Ask.** The big ask of faith is a divine test of Abraham. God is going to ask Abraham, in faith, to give up everything in the most costly way imaginable.

But, it is a test. We love the assurance of tested products and the comfort of real life reviews. No one wants to go on an untested roller coaster. No one wants to use an untested surgeon. But as much as we love the security of tested things, we always appreciate it when we aren't the crash test dummies.

As Christians, we are "faith alone" people. We really believe that it is faith alone in Jesus, and the righteousness we are given in him that is our sole confidence before God. But this means that there's no back up product when you get to the gate of heaven. All of us are building to our greatest trial: death. And do you really want to wait until that moment when your faith is tested?

Paul calls Abraham, "the man of faith." Which means that the test of his faith is the crash test of faith for all who hope in Jesus. This story isn't Abraham's trial, it is the trial of all who put their hope in Jesus.

If you've just joined us, Genesis is the very first book in the Bible and it frames for us the hope of all humanity in three acts. First, we see God's perfect creation of a perfect world. Second, we see how man sinfully rebelled and lost it all. Third, it shows us God's promise to bring restoration and redemption through one particular child of Eve. The remainder of the book tracks the family tree of that promised child. Right now, the promise depends on Abraham's son, Isaac. In him, all the families of the earth would be blessed. He's the boy who holds the promise for the whole world.

Which is why this test is all the more difficult: **Genesis 22:1-2**, After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."

The author of Genesis wrote that sentence as if every word was an arrow straight to Abraham's heart. Take your son: the son I promised to give you. This was the son that Abraham and Sarah had been faithfully waiting on for nearly 25 years. 25 years of struggling to believe God would do it. Now they finally had the son of promise.

Your only son, Isaac: As part of their lack of trust, Sarah gave Abraham her servant Hagar in hopes that she would bear the promised son. But that son, Ishamel, was not the son of promise. While God cared for him, both Ishamel and Hagar had been sent away. He was gone. All Abraham had left was the one son, his only son, the promised son, Isaac.

Whom you love: In case it didn't go without saying.

And go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering. That word "burnt offering" means what it sounds like, burned to nothing. The Greek translation of the Old Testament translates it as a word we know all too well: "holocaust." He was to be wholly consumed.

This son, who Abraham already struggled to believe would be born, upon whom rested not only the affection of his parents, but their livelihood and the promise of redemption for all the nations, God was asking him to offer up that son.

What would you do? While none of us will face something as dire as this—we can imagine a similar point of tension. In preaching and in writing there's a phrase you often learn, "kill your darling." In other words, we might have some treasured thought, some brilliant hope, or a turn of phrase without which

we don't believe we will be able to accomplish anything meaningful. We begin to think that our whole purpose in life, and our enjoyment of it, is wrapped up in these darlings and we could never understand why anyone would ever want us to get rid of them.

But a good editor reminds the writer: it's not needed. A good preacher is reminded: God needs his words, not yours. So too, we all have these darlings in our life which if called to put on the altar would cause us not only great pain, but great insecurity. How could I share Jesus with nonbelievers if my faith in God causes me to look silly and foolish before them? How could I ever experience love if my faith in God's word calls me out of this sinful relationship? How could I ever be financially generous to others if my faith in God calls me to leave this job so I can better lead my family? How will my children and my family ever see church as something good if it means we take less weekend trips away, or return a little earlier than others? I can't give those up—I need those. God needs those.

Abraham isn't just being asked to get rid of his darling. This is his "burn the boats" moment. He sent away Ishamel, the son of Hagar. He's not a backup plan anymore. Sarah, being nearly a hundred, only conceived by a miracle of God. She's not fertile, and God's promise was specific to Isaac and him alone. If he does this, the only thing he has left is the God who made the promises at the start. Abraham's hope in anything other than God would be impossible.

The Lord's promise to Abraham concerning Isaac was life. But the Lord's present demand of faith was the death of that very life. This is the paradox of faith. Biblical faith isn't wrapped up in the accessories God uses to fulfill his promise. Biblical faith is in God alone. Jesus himself says that to gain our life, faith calls us to lose it. Faith trusts God for everything with everything.

One brief aside here. Abraham is currently living in a land where pagan nations frequently offered child sacrifices to their idols. As readers of the Bible, we know the Lord finds child sacrifices abhorrent, evil and judges severely those who practice them. It's not the nature of the ask that would have struck Abraham as odd—it's the connection of Isaac to God's promise which would have been the most confusing to him.

So, what would he do? Well, here's our second point: **The Brave Ascent.**

Notice the stunning result of this: **Genesis 22:3**, "So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him."

What we see in Abraham is nothing short of amazing. His ascent up the mountain of sacrifice is a beautiful display of a living faith. And we can see this in three ways.

He went *without delay*. This is remarkable isn't it? We already saw Lot dilly dalley when he was warned of judgment. But here Abraham is called to walk into the hardest thing he's ever done and he gets up early to do it. He gathers all the supplies he needs so they wouldn't have to pause or stop along the way.

At this point, Abraham has learned a thing or two. He knows that if he delays, he might never do it. If he waited till later in the day he might have more strength, but he may also have less conviction. When we read God's word and find it calling us to respond in faith, do not delay.

When we know what to do, when the word of God calls us to put on Christ and to put off sin, do not delay. I don't mean to make all of us morning people. But I do think that the morning is often when our conviction is most clear. You might be stronger later in the day. You might be more lively later in the day. But after a night of wrestling with the Lord, the morning is often when our conviction is the weightiest. Faith's conviction beats out the flesh's strength. Strong and fresh in faith is more effective than strong and fresh in the flesh. Abraham knew that if he got up, took time preparing his coffee, went and tended the flock, chatted with Sarah and ate a good breakfast, he'd have time to get caught up in the day's events. Maybe he'd have second thoughts, he'd start to rationalize it. Maybe the conviction would just go away, maybe the issue would clear up?

When you spend time in prayer, reading God's word, and hearing God's word—there may be times when you know you need to do something. It might be hard. It might feel uncomfortable. When that happens, do not delay. It will not solve your problem. It will not ease the tension. It will not soothe your conscience. Get up, go. Go early to the Lord. Go early to make things right with your brother. Send the text asking your friend to read the Bible with you. Go with prayerful urgency. Go early. You don't need a good breakfast and limber joints to accomplish God's plans. You need faith that rises early and begins what the flesh will always find an excuse to delay.

He went without delay but he also went *in brave faith*. Remember that this is the biggest test, but it's not his first. It came "after these things." He's been here for 30,40 years now. Abraham has faced smaller trials, some he's passed, some he's failed. But all have grown him. I remember when God helped Sarah and I break the "season" myth. We used to say to ourselves in difficult seasons that, "it's just a season." This is true. But what is behind a difficult season is often another difficult season. God's grace is not that life gets easier, but that these seasons, by grace, make us stronger.

Charles Spurgeon says this, "Expect then, beloved, your trials to multiply as you proceed to heaven. Do not think that as you grow in grace the path will become smoother beneath your feet and the heavens more peaceful above your head. But on the contrary, reckon that as God gives you greater skill as a soldier, he will send you upon more arduous tasks that you may honor him and grow in holy confidence."

And look at how Abraham proves this: this is no straining and miserable man. **Genesis 22:4-8**, "On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you." And 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 they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together."

Do you see Abraham's brave faith? Abraham turned to the two men with him and said, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you." Now, you might think, "What else would he say? Stay here while I go over there and sacrifice the boy?" But Abraham's faith is pressed, but it's not panicked. He's conflicted, but he's not confused.

We see that brave faith when Isaac finally asks that big question. Isaac looks at his dad and speaks the only words he'll say this whole time: "I've figured out what we are doing, and I've realized we seem to be missing a very important piece...where's the lamb for the burnt offering?"

The author of Hebrews tells us that no unbelief made Abraham stagger. We see that stable and un-staggerable faith here in his answer. He looks at his son, his only son, whom he loves and he says words of deepest hope to all who are in dire hours: "The Lord will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son."

How? He doesn't know. But what he knows more certainly is that God's promise is true and that God keeps his word. And he gives that confidence to Isaac, and then we see those wonderful lines of intimacy: "So they went, both of them together." Three Hebrew words show the unity of faith these two had as father and son, "So they went," "both of them," "together." What privilege in the Christian life that though some roads are lonely, we never walk alone. There is bravery in the company of the Lord's people and in his promise.

He went without delay. He went in brave faith. And third, he went *all the way*. Pay attention to the grammar of this passage because the author slows it down intentionally to draw out the drama as if he were a Hollywood movie producer: **Genesis 22:9-10**, "When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son."

What do you think was going through the minds of these two at that time? Isaac, the beloved, quiet, trusting and yet entirely confused. Abraham, raises perhaps the same knife that marked Isaac off for the promise by circumcision—now it is raised to bring his life to an end.

You see, here's the biggest challenge of faith. Abraham knows full well what we know: disobedience always costs. Faithlessness risks everything. That's been the story of Abraham's life. He knows that his own unfaithfulness almost cost him the promise time and time again. But here, he has to wonder what we will wonder at some point too: "Is it actually my faithful obedience that will finally do me in?"

At the bottom of our faith is the fear that one day our faith will force us to put it all on the line. And it will. James 4:17 reminds us that "whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin." When you feel the command of God in your life—you must do it. You must go.

When the Lord calls us to offer everything, and when we hear it with the ears of faith we become wonderfully unsettled. If God is calling you to repent today, do it. Do not delay. Do you feel like you need to seek forgiveness from someone, do it. Do not delay. Do you feel like you need to make a change that will cause you to seem like a radical to your friends, a religious zealot to your co-workers, or a fool even to your family, do it, do not delay. But make no mistake when the Lord's genuine conviction causes us to faithfully follow it will feel like the death of everything we hoped our faith would provide.

Will our obedience, will our faith, do us in? This experience is the end of our faith. It brings us here either in this life, or when we stand before the Lord one day. Would you rely on your worldly accessories to the promise? Your comfort, your peace, your friends, respect and relationships? Or would you throw it all on the altar of faith?

For those who do, what awaits us is in a sense, a death. Our sin demands death. Faith accepts that death is what we deserve. Faith feels like death, but only because it reveals what was always true: sin demands our death. But faith is beautiful in that it reveals what otherwise was never possible: the

provision of new life. Here is our third point this morning: **A Better Arrangement**. We provide the faith, the Lord provides everything else.

Genesis 22:11-14, But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place, “The Lord will provide”; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.”

When the Lord calls to us, and our answer is the “Here I am” of faith, the Lord provides the lamb. Make no mistake, Abraham died that day. Isaac died that day. They died to every false hope they’ve ever had, and because of that, they lived. If you look down at verse 19, you’ll see the wonderful conclusion. They return to the two men, who have no idea what just happened, and what do we read? “They arose and went together and lived at Beersheba (which means the well of the promise).”

The Lord asked Abraham, and the Lord asked Isaac for everything and they gave it. Yet it cost them nothing. The Lord saw Abraham’s faith, and he said, “Now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld even your son from me.”

And the Lord in a very real sense returned Abraham’s son by providing a substitute lamb. And in verses 15-18 he reaffirmed the promise to Abraham. **Genesis 22:17-18**, “I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.”

So when was Abraham’s faith proved? It seems it was here. But remember, it was all the way back in chapter 15 where it is said that Abraham believed and it was counted to him as righteousness. Abraham already believed. He was already justified by faith. But here on the mountain of God, it was not Abraham who was justified by faith, God was justified as faithful. The mountain was not called, “Abraham’s faith provided.” It was called, “The Lord will provide.”

God proved himself faithful to Abraham. The promise brought him to the altar of everything, and everything died for him, and yet by God’s gracious intervention he gained far more than he lost. He gained back his son, he gained back his life, he gained an unshakable confidence in his God.

Why was he able to do this? Not because of his own might. But because of what he believed about God. The author of Hebrews says it this way: **Hebrews 11:17-19**, “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, “Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.” He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.”

Do you see that unstaggarable faith? He knew God made a promise, and he knew that promise was through Isaac, so he knew that even if he killed Isaac, even if it got to the point it never would get to, God would even raise Isaac up. He was convinced that not even death could bring an end to God’s promise therefore we could trust it not only up to death—not only when the storm swallows the mountain, not only when the wind tests the wire—but through death itself.

And let us not forget on this Resurrection Sunday morning what Jesus himself said: **John 8:56**, “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.” What Abraham saw on that mountain was not just a substitute sacrifice for Isaac, he saw the substitute sacrifice for all those who shared in his sin, but also shared in his faith.

2 Chronicles tells us that Solomon’s temple was built in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah. Just outside the temple mount, Jesus was led out that dark Friday, and there the substitute lamb was slain. The joy Abraham had in seeing the provision of the ram is the joy of seeing God’s provision for sinners in Jesus.

There, on that cross, the Father prepared a sacrifice. There, on the cross, a Son willingly offered himself up. But there, on that cross, there was no substitute. Jesus stayed. He stayed because he himself trusted in the promise. He is not only the man of faith, he is our model of it. Jesus trusted his own earthly life into nothing and no one but his heavenly Father. And he gave his all, and it cost him it all, but three days later he rose above it all. What he lost was nothing an empty tomb couldn’t restore. And now he’s risen, ascended, ruling, rejoicing, and calling us to him. There are no more tests for him—just the eternal testimony of hope and joy for all who believe in him.

Brothers and sisters, Abraham was always able to look at that mountain in moments of weakness and say, “There I know the Lord provides. Therefore, I can give it all.” But let us now find faith as our deepest friend as we look at the cross of Jesus where he paid for our sins, and the empty tomb where he promises us life, and let us say, “There I know the Lord provides. Therefore I can give it all.” This is a better arrangement. No silly questions of cost here. For what we lose by faith, we gain by faith.

So let us raise the knife of faith to all our idols so that we might be raised in the newness of life by the living and reigning Son of God. Faith is neither friend nor foe. It is nothing. But Jesus is a friend of sinners, and he has promised to provide eternal life, even in the midst of darkest moments, for all who faithfully repent and turn to him. Faith takes us further than we want in order to give us not only far more than we desire, but far better than we deserve.