

BaptistWay Press® Premium Commentary

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Studies in Rescue and Redemption

Lesson One

The Lord Will Provide

Focal Text

Genesis 22:1-19

Background

Genesis 22:1-19

Main Idea

God revealed his rescue and redemption in response to Abraham's demonstration of faith.

Question to Explore

How deep is your trust in God?

Quick Read

Abraham obeyed, even when God asked him to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac, and experienced God's rescue and redemption.

Introduction

It is one of the most incredible things I have ever seen—a group of professional *blind* skiers. To accomplish this amazing feat, they have undergone significant training. Paired with sighted skiers, these blind athletes are taught how to make turns. Once they have mastered the turns, they are taken to the slalom slope, where sighted partners ski next to them giving instructions, prompting them at important moments to go “Left!” or “Right!”

It is important that they carefully listen to and obey the commands. All along, however, they are fully dependent on the word of the sighted skier. The entire enterprise demands complete trust, or it will be a catastrophe. As I think of these fully-dependent, blind

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skiers, I cannot help but think this is a tremendous example of the Christian life. As Christians, we are desperately in need of God's guidance. We too, are blind without our guide. Our job is to rely fully on his word and to trust him to direct our lives.¹

One man who demonstrated a radical trust in God was named Abraham. Throughout the life of Abraham his faith in God was continually tested. It began with God's call to him to leave his homeland ("Ur," which is ancient Mesopotamia) and travel to Canaan, the so-called "Promised Land" (cf. Genesis 12). Abraham passed the test; he believed God and he obeyed. He left behind the world he knew for the unknown—an example of radical trust in God.

However, he and his wife were childless, but still Abraham and his wife Sarah trusted God to provide (cf. Genesis 15). After many long years of waiting, eventually, God did provide, and Sarah had a son named Isaac. In her old age, she "laughs" at the thought of a child, and so he is named for the Hebrew word for laughter (Isaac means "he laughs").

However, no test of Abraham compares to what happens next. God will ask him to take his son Isaac up to Mt. Moriah and sacrifice him. Remarkably, once again, Abraham obeyed. Yet, God did not require him to sacrifice his son. Once his faith was proven, God provided a sacrifice in Isaac's place. The place was given a new name "The LORD Will Provide" (Gen. 22:14). Abraham trusted God and God provided the means of Abraham's rescue and redemption. The story reminds us that God wants to be our redeemer, he wants to rescue us, but we must act in faith and trust him to experience his provision. This theme of trusting in God for rescue and redemption is one of the major themes of the entire Bible.

Commentary

The Binding of Isaac (22:1-12)

22:1. God's instruction for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22:1-2) must have been a devastating request. It was highly ironic, given the importance God had placed upon the birth of Isaac (see Ch. 21), and the promise of establishing his covenant through him (17:19).² The eventual Mosaic covenant will reveal that God never intended for people to participate in child sacrifice (Leviticus 18:21; Deuteronomy 12:31), a point the author of Genesis seems to hint at, when we are told that God "tested" Abraham. The same word "tested" is used with David testing out Saul's armor before the battle with Goliath (1 Samuel 17:39).³ It is a test of quality or gaminess and God's people can expect this (e.g., Exodus 15:25; 16:4), however, Scripture tells us that God never tempts anyone to sin (James 1:13).

22:2. God commands Abraham "to take" his "son" his "only son" whom he is said to "love." The beloved son of Abraham, Isaac, will later be a title of Jesus, the "unique son" and God's "beloved" (cf. John 3:16; Hebrews 11:17; 1 John 4:9). The command involves three simple imperatives: "Take," "go," and "sacrifice him." We do not know if Abraham

had any further explanation than that.⁴ Sarah goes unmentioned in the story; so, we do not know if she was aware of it at all.⁵

The location of the sacrifice is called Mt. Moriah, a three-day journey from Beersheba. Elsewhere in Scripture this is said to be the same location that David purchased (the threshing floor of Araunah), and was the location upon which Solomon built the temple (cf. 2 Chronicles 3:1).⁶ Although later passages do not refer to this incident, it is possible that it could be the same location.⁷

22:3. Abraham's response to God was immediate and obedient. God commands and then Abraham acts, preparing the donkey and the wood. Since he does it "himself," this leads some to speculate that it may have been done in secret. The use of a donkey here is not surprising, experts know donkeys were domesticated, even centuries before the time of Abraham (circ. 3,500 BC). Donkeys were used as pack animals that could carry heavy loads for extended periods with little water, which is precisely what is needed for the journey ahead.⁸

In telling us it is a three-day journey, we can estimate the distance at about forty-five miles from Beersheba to Moriah.⁹ This long journey must have made the entire experience even more dramatic for Abraham. The author of Genesis seems to purposely "prolong" the story by giving us excessive and deliberate details—such as, saddling a donkey, taking two servants, or cutting enough wood.

22:4-5. After the three-day journey, Abraham sees the mountain in the distance and tells the servants to wait behind, saying "We will worship and then we will come back to you." This leaves open the question of what Abraham meant by this. Does he believe he will return with Isaac? One scholar is convinced that he did, saying, "Abraham's assurance to them that he and Isaac will return indicates that he is convinced that the test will not necessarily lead to the death of his son. Abraham knows that God has a plan to bless and not to harm Isaac, and therefore he obediently follows God's instructions."¹⁰ This, also, seems to be the premise in Hebrews 11:17-19.

22:6-8. We can only speculate about the conversation between Abraham and Isaac as they made their way up the mountain. What were they talking about? What was Abraham thinking? What was Isaac thinking? The Scriptures are silent. Then, the silence is broken with the question of Isaac, "Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" One can only imagine this question heightening the anguish for Abraham.¹¹ Abraham's calm and trusting reply, "God will provide" foreshadows the end of this story, but the drama is intensified still further, when he replies, "God himself will provide the lamb."¹²

22:9-10. The drama reaches its climax with Isaac bound on the altar and Abraham holding a raised knife in hand. This dramatic moment has an important effect; it is a teaching moment. Abraham is willing to forgo the promised blessing (even his son) for

God's sake and for the sake of his relationship with God. Everything else is subordinate to his relationship.¹³

The image of a father holding a knife over his son is horrifying; the word "to slay" is used elsewhere for the "slaughter" of human sacrifices by the pagans (Isaiah. 57:5; Ezekiel. 16:21; 23:39). The tension is high in the moment; you might say, "You could cut the air with a knife!" Archaeologists have uncovered similar knives to the one Abraham may have used. One knife was found next to a skeleton; it had a ten-inch long, bronze blade and was wide with double edges and a limestone pommel. It was discovered near Hebron (dating from the time of Abraham, called the Middle Bronze II period, or about 1700 BC).¹⁴ Although the knife does not say "This was Abraham's, the one used on Mt. Moriah," it does give a picture of the kind of blade used at the time.

2:11. The "angel of LORD" can also be translated "messenger of the LORD" (also used in 16:7). In Scripture, angels are divine messengers who often appear in the form of a human person (cf. 18:2). Seemingly out of nowhere, this angelic messenger appeared, stopping the sacrifice of Isaac. Interestingly, both Isaac and Ishmael were dramatically saved by an angel from heaven (cf. 21:17).¹⁵ However, what is most significant in the story is not the saving of Isaac but the faith and obedience of Abraham. The Scriptures say Abraham was righteous because of this faith (15:6). It is this same kind of faith that Christians are called to in the New Testament (e.g., James 2:21-23).

2:12. The angel calls Isaac Abraham's "only son" (cf. 22:2, 12, 16). Obviously, Abraham had another, Ishmael 16:16, but practically speaking, Isaac is Abraham's "only son" in another sense. It will *only* be through Isaac that the promise of God is fulfilled; it will be through his seed all the nations will be blessed (cf. 12:1-3; 13:16; 17:19)¹⁶ and ultimately, though him the Messiah will come.

God's Provision (22:13-14)

22:13-14. With the intervention of an angel and by God's provision of the substitution of a ram for Isaac, the dramatic tension is finally released. God not only stops the killing of Isaac, he provides the sacrifice. In the Scriptures, burnt offerings were used to atone for human wrongdoing and as a reminder that obedience alone is insufficient.

Animal sacrifice was commonly performed in the ancient world, but it was not always seen or understood that the sacrifice was itself a substitute. It is clear enough in some instances in the Scripture (e.g., firstborn substitution and the Passover lamb during the Exodus),¹⁷ but even in the Old Testament, sacrifices were not commonly understood as a substitute. Most ancients sacrificed to their deity an offering for establishing communion. The principal of a vicarious or substitutionary element was rare, even in Israel, which makes the theme of redemption in this passage so important. We see this best as Christians in the substitute of Jesus Christ as the ultimate provision of a substitute sacrifice for us (Mark 10:45; John 1:29; Heb. 7:27; 10:14; 1 Peter 3:18).

Therefore, Abraham names the place “The LORD Will Provide.” It was not unusual for God’s name to become associated with a miraculous moment or place. This place in Hebrew is called *Yahweh Yireh* (commonly known as Jehovah Jireh (more accurately), and literally means “Yahweh will see.” We use phrases like this today when we say, “I will see that it gets done.” In other words, God *saw* the matter through to completion. God made sure that it would be provided. God’s provision for Abraham was the ram. It was a substitute offered to Abraham once God could “see” his faith. Then, after the LORD saw the faith of Abraham, Abraham saw the provision of God.¹⁸

Again, we are reminded that this mountain was called “Moriah.” There are only two other mountains that are ever referred to as “the mountain of the LORD.” One is Jerusalem (Psalm 24:3; Isa. 2:3; Zechariah. 8:3) and the other is Sinai (Numbers 10:33).¹⁹ For us as Christians, we know God also has provided for us on a mountain, sometimes called Mt. Calvary—the place where Christ, the ultimate sacrifice for sins and the substitute for humanity laid down his life, because God himself provided the sacrifice.²⁰

The Angel of the LORD (22:15-19)

22:15-18. The angel speaks a second time. This second encounter must have happened at the same place as the first encounter but just after the sacrifice of the ram was complete (Gen. 22:11). By presenting the story in this way, the author of Genesis shows that as a result of Abraham passing the “test,” the promise God made to him was renewed, even as the promise is reiterated (see vv. 16-18; cf. earlier chapters 12, 13, 15, 17, and 18).²¹

The episode concludes with a blessing, pronounced by God on Abraham (22:16–18), assuring him that his descendants would be as “numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore” (22:17).²² The angel’s speech (22:15–18) helps to reaffirm the promises God made to Abraham when he called him and asked him for his obedience (12:1).

This obedience follows Abraham’s pattern of responding to God. We see it evidenced in the patriarch’s faithful departure from his homeland (12:4–6)—not to mention his later willingness to sacrifice choice land to his relative Lot (13:8), and now to offer his own son Isaac to God (22:10–12). Thus, the promises made by God are guaranteed by the provision of Isaac and complete the main purpose of the Abrahamic narrative. Everything else that remains after this merely ties up the loose ends and prepares the reader for a transition to the next biblical character—Jacob.²³

2:19. After this episode, Abraham and Isaac return to Beersheba. This important city was known best in the Scriptures for being the southern end of Israel’s territorial boundary. One common expression in the Bible to explain Israel’s boundaries is “from Dan to Beersheba” (see for example Judges 20:1; 1 Samuel 3:20). Its location is believed to be in the northern Negev and probably derives its name from the wells dug there to provide water (see Gen. 26:23–33).²⁴

Conclusion

God asked Abraham to take Isaac to Mount Moriah and sacrifice him. We are told this was a “test” but Abraham did not know it. He simply obeyed. In the end, God rescued Isaac, and through Abraham’s faith God would fulfill his great promise—ultimately leading to the rescue of the entire world—when at Mount Calvary, God would provide the sacrifice of his Son in our place. The story of Abraham has much to teach us about what it means to really trust God.

First, the story reminds us that all true faith may be tested. The Apostle Peter compared the suffering of early Christians to a test whose purpose was to prove the “genuineness” of faith, like gold refined in a fire (1 Pet. 1:7). Abraham’s faith was also tested. Would he be willing to give up his son? This question, asked in the Old Testament, is powerfully answered in the New Testament by God himself giving up his “only” and “beloved” Son (Matthew 3:17; John 3:16). The emphasis on Jesus as the Son of God runs throughout the New Testament and clearly looks back on what Abraham did.

This story of Abraham reminds of a second lesson—faith comes *before* the rescue. We have a saying, “I’ll believe it when I see it.” However, faith does not operate like that. Faith requires us to trust God even when we cannot see him. One of my favorite movie scenes is from the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, when Indiana is facing the invisible bridge. There is no other way to cross the chasm, but to his eyes there is nothing visibly there. He realizes this is a test of faith. Only when he steps out does he realize the bridge was there all along.

In the same way, Abraham did not know how God was going to rescue his son. In fact, the Book of Hebrews makes this clear when it says,

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, even though God had said to him, ‘It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.’ 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).

Abraham’s story reminds us that faith means more than trusting that God truly *can* provide, it means trusting that God *will* provide. After Abraham sees the ram in the thicket this lamb becomes the substitute for his son. Abraham called the place “The LORD Will Provide” because God had provided. We often say that this means “God is my provider” (viz., Jehovah Jireh), but the word in Hebrews literally means “the God who sees,” or in other words, “the God who sees *it through*.” Thus, once God sees Abraham’s faith, then God sees fit to provide the solution.

This is also true in our lives. To experience God’s rescue in the saving work of Jesus Christ who is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29), we must place our faith squarely on the God who does provide.

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¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2016/11/17/us/danelle-umstead-paralympic-skier/index.html>. (Accessed 5/22/18).

² D. A. Carson, ed., *NIV Zondervan Study Bible: Built on the Truth of Scripture and Centered on the Gospel Message* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 61.

³ James McKeown, *Genesis*, The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 117.

⁴ John H. Sailhamer, “Genesis,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), 168.

⁵ McKeown, 117.

⁶ John D. Barry, et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016), Ge 22:2.

⁷ Victor Harold Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas, and John H. Walton, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), Gen. 22:1–2.

⁸ Matthews, Gen. 22:3.

⁹ Carson, ed., 61.

¹⁰ McKeown, 117–118.

¹¹ Sailhamer, 168.

- ¹² McKeown, 118.
¹³ Ibid.
¹⁴ Walton, 98.
¹⁵ Barry, Gen. 21:17.
¹⁶ McKeown, 118.
¹⁷ Matthews, Gen. 22:13–19.
¹⁸ Barry, Gen. 22:14.
¹⁹ Walton, 511.
²⁰ Carson, ed., 62.
²¹ Sailhamer, 170.
²² McKeown, 118.
²³ Ibid., 118–119.
²⁴ Matthews, Gen. 22:19.