

**"Between Trust and a Hard Place"**

*Genesis 22:1-14*

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If you had the chance to ask God a question, what question would it be?

A year or so ago, a teacher in a Christian school invited her third-grade students to pen letters to God, posing to God the questions and thoughts they had on their minds.

"Dear God," one child wrote, "I bet it's very hard for you to love all of everybody in the whole world. There are only four people in our family and I can never do it."

"Dear God," wrote another, "Thank you for the baby brother, but what I prayed for was a puppy."

Several of the letters were about animals: Why did you make mosquitos? Why haven't you made any new animals lately? All we've got are the old ones.

A girl named Norma wrote: "Dear God, Did you mean for [the] giraffe to look like that or was it an accident?"

Some were questions on morality:

"Dear God," wrote one, "On Halloween I'm going to wear a devil's costume. Is that all right with you?"

Another: "Dear God, I went to this wedding and they kissed right in church. Is that ok?"

My favorite: "Dear God, Maybe Cain and Abel would not kill each [other] so much if they had their own rooms. It works with my brother."

Others were deeply theological:

"Dear God, Why is Sunday School on Sunday? I thought it was supposed to be our day of rest."

"Dear God," wrote another, "What does it mean you are a jealous God? I thought you had everything."

(Andželika Jasevičiūtė, "These 3rd Graders Have Some Questions For God And It's Hilarious," [BoredPanda.com](http://BoredPanda.com), accessed June 22, 2020).

What question would you ask?

The Baptist pastor, H. Stephen Shoemaker, says, "Near the top of my list of questions for God is to ask God to explain the events of Genesis 22: 'Why would you ask Abraham to sacrifice his son and drag him and Sarah and Isaac through all that terror only to deliver him at the end?'" (*GodStories*, 42).

Terror is right. Would not every single one of them be forever scarred by this testing?

In 1984, the biblical scholar, Phyllis Tribble, published a book entitled "Texts of Terror." The subject matter were those biblical stories that put women in terrible and terrifying positions – texts from the Bible that are so inhuman toward women that you wonder why they made it in the Bible to begin with.

If Phyllis Tribble had written a follow-up volume to "Texts of Terror," only this time she focused on biblical stories that treat children in absolutely inhuman ways – horror stories where a child is the victim of unspeakable violence and savagery – I have to believe "the binding of Isaac" would have made the top of her list.

Jews call it simply the *Akedah*, which is Hebrew for "binding."

A father binding his only son with rope, so that he can sacrifice him as a burnt offering to a seemingly sadistic God – a God who would give him the son in his old age, and then test Abraham by ordering him to kill his own son and burn him as tribute?

Terror is right.

What redeeming quality can this story have? And do we want to worship a God who would demand such a terrible price for his blessing?

The first verse seems to announce the story's purpose: this happened as a "testing" of Abraham.

God called his name, "Abraham."

Abraham said, "Here am I."

God said, "Take you son, your only son whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him up as a burnt offering." The Hebrew word is *yōlah*, an offering totally consumed by flame – a *holocaust*.

Abraham said nothing, but rose early the next morning, saddled his donkey, took the wood for the fire, two servants, and his son Isaac, and they set off toward Moriah. After a three-day journey that the philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, said lasted longer than the four thousand years separating us from the event, they arrived at the foot of the mountain. In Abraham's one hand was a burning coal for the fire, in his other, a knife. The wood he placed on Isaac's back for him to carry.

Isaac then said his first words: "Father"

Abraham for the second time: "Here am I."

Isaac said: "Here are the fire and the wood. Where is the lamb to be offered?"

All Abraham could do was choke out the words, hoping against hope: "God will provide."

When they reached the place of the sacrifice, Abraham built the altar, arranged the wood, and bound his son atop the pyre. Abraham then stretched out his hand and took the knife. As he raised it up to slay his own son, a messenger of God called from heaven: "Abraham! Abraham!"

Abraham for the third time answered: "Here am I."

The messenger of God said: "Do not stretch out your hand against the boy. *Now I know your fear and reverence for God. You have not withheld your own son, your only son, from me.*"

Abraham lifted his eyes and saw a ram caught in a thicket by its thorns. He cut his boy loose, bound the ram to the altar, and offered it up in place of Isaac. Thus Abraham named this place of sacrifice, "YHWH-Jireh," which means *God-will-provide*.

What do we do with this story?

Too often, it is interpreted as a story that holds up Abraham as a model of unquestioning obedience to God. But obedience is a virtue *only if it serves a just cause*. Obedience in service of an unjust cause is servile, cowardly, and criminal even.

Far too many were *obedient* to the ideals and commands of Adolph Hitler, and we wouldn't dream of saying their obedience was virtuous. Far too many have been *obedient* to the systems of oppression and racism in our own country, and we wouldn't dream of saying their obedience was a virtue.

Or would we ever claim as virtuous those who in our recent memory have killed their own children, because they believed they'd heard the voice of God telling them to do so? Of course not. We'd say some illness or something darker had control of their mind, but not God.

So if this is a story about blind obedience, and we want to honor Abraham for his blind obedience, then we best be ready for God to ask us to do some truly horrific things, too?

And what does this story say about that God?

One of my favorite Old Testament scholars, Ellen Davis, claims “There are just two possible answers, and both are difficult.”

She says, “One answer: [God is] a sadistic deity who takes pleasure in human pain. But that answer is biblically impossible. If God is a sadist, then the rest of the Bible is a lie, and so is everything we say and sing here in [church].

And so,” says Davis, “I am forced to choose the only alternative: God calls for this test because *God needs to know* — desperately needs to know — whether Abraham is completely devoted to God or not” (“Radical Trust,” July 25, 2011, [faithandleadership.com](http://faithandleadership.com)).

It’s not very conventional to say that God Almighty needs to know something, is it?

If God is God, then God knows all, right? Nothing is beyond God’s purview, right?

The renowned Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, points out that if we are to take scripture seriously, we must wrestle with this dilemma. “Verse 1,” he says, “sets the test, suggesting God wants to *know* something. It is not a game with God. God genuinely does not know. And that is settled,” he points out, “in verse 12, [when the messenger of God says,] ‘Now I *know*’ (*Genesis, Interpretation Commentary Series*, 187).

So if this story isn’t about blind obedience to God, and it’s not about God being sadistic, and God really did need to test Abraham, why did he need to test him in this way?

(It’s like peeling an onion, isn’t it? Each question we ask just unearths another layer of questions.)

I think it’s important to remember that this story does not stand alone in our Bibles. It is part of a story that stretches long before Abraham — a story about a broken humanity that kept choosing to do what was evil in the eyes of God. It’s a story about trying to be like God, when Adam and Eve chose to eat the fruit. It’s a story about jealousy, when Cain chose to murder his brother, Abel. It’s a story about trying to reach the heights of divinity, when the tower of Babel was built. It’s a story about a flood. It’s a story of human brokenness and humanity’s propensity to choose what is evil over what is good.

But rather than give up on humanity, God chose to bless humanity in a new way. He would choose a person and make of that person a great nation. And, the whole world — all of history — would be blessed through this people. It’s the story of Abraham.

It is vital that we remember that Abraham is *the person* on whom God had chosen to rely completely — *one* person to carry out God’s plan of blessing for *all* people. God staked everything on Abraham, even the whole world.

But there is serious reason to doubt that Abraham has staked everything on God.

You might recall those stories of Abraham passing off his beautiful wife Sarah as his sister when traveling in foreign lands. So Sarah gets taken into the royal a harem as a concubine, not once but twice (Genesis 12:10-20 & Genesis 20), and Abraham got protected status as her “brother.” God never told Abraham to do that. Abraham did that because he was scared. Abraham did that because he *did not* trust God to pull them through the danger.

Abraham’s lack of trust puts God in a terrible situation, too.

God is counting entirely on Abraham, but if Abraham does not entirely trust God, then all hope is lost.

Maybe that is what this test is about: not simple, blind obedience, but something deeper, something more important, something like *trust*.

In the Christian tradition, we have often called it *faith*, but, in the truest sense of the word, faith is not “right belief,” but *active trust*.

Kathleen Norris, an adult convert to the Christianity, says it this way: “No small part of my religious conversion has been coming to know that faith is best thought of as a verb, not a ‘thing’ that you either have or you don’t” (*Amazing Grace*, 169).

Maybe what this story makes clear is that the thing we call faith is not in the first instance a matter of what we think about God, but about whether we *trust* God. And, maybe even more importantly, it’s a story about whether God can *trust* us.

It was several years ago now – my first of seminary – and I was in a bind.

It wasn’t just that Princeton was expensive. It was that New Jersey was expensive. I had a 90% scholarship, but still had to max out my student loans in order to cover the remaining expenses: the rest of tuition, the books, and all of the fees. Christen was beginning her first year as a teacher, but it was in a small, private Christian school that paid somewhere between a hill of beans and a sack of potatoes.

Christen’s paycheck covered the cost of our rent, her gas between home and work, and, if we were lucky, some of our groceries. Those mostly went on our credit card, which we had maxed out by early spring.

Then it happened.

The car broke down. Our 2002 Subaru Forrester with roughly 170,000 miles had a catastrophic failure, and wouldn’t even start without serious repairs. The cost was \$2,400, but it might as well have been a million bucks in our eyes. Without the car, Christen couldn’t make the 40 minute commute to work and would lose her job, but we couldn’t afford the repair.

We had a credit card's worth of debt, unpaid bills sitting on the counter, rent due, no savings account, and about \$12 dollars in our checking account.

So, I did what all grad school students do when they run out of money. I called my dad.

"Dad," I said. "You won't believe this, but the car broke down. We don't know how to pay for it. Credit card is maxed out. But Christen needs it to get back and forth. She can't lose this job, dad, or we're sunk. We'll be kicked out of our apartment. We don't even know how we're going to afford food this week. Pops, we're in real trouble here."

There was a palpable silence on the other end of the line.

And then my dad said, "I'm sorry to hear that, son. But I can't help you this time."

"What?!" I asked. "You're just going to let us drown? We'll be on the streets, dad!"

"Son," he said, "you keep telling me that you're going into the ministry, that God has called you. I think it's time you learned to rely on God."

Well, truth be told, I felt a bit like Isaac — the victim of my father's exercise in faith. My life was falling apart at the seams and dad was just going to let it — not even try to intervene. That was how I saw it, any way.

But dad saw it another way. He saw himself as the stumbling block that was preventing me from growing up and facing the hard realities of this world. He saw himself as standing in the way of God being able to trust me.

He also had far more trust than me that God would indeed provide.

That's *some* kind of trust.

The question for us is, what kind?

What kind of trust does this story call you to? What kind of trust does it make you struggle with, struggle against, struggle to accept?

You see, that's your part. I can't do it for you, and neither can anyone else. You will have to wrestle with this story. You will have to wrestle with the God you find there. And then, you will have to wrestle with whether God can trust you.

Can you put your trust in that God? And can that God put his trust in you?

Amen.