

Well, how has your week gone? Has everything gone great for you this week? Has everything turned out just the way you planned with no surprises or problems? Or has your faith been tested this week? Life can be full of surprises with all sorts of twists and turns as we journey through it, as we all know too well.

Take for the example the story of a bagpipe player who was asked to play at the graveside service for a homeless man. The man had no friends or family, and the service was at a cemetery in the backwoods of Kentucky. The bagpipe player was not familiar with this area and got lost, and being a man, he didn't ask for directions.

When he finally arrived an hour late, he didn't see the funeral director or the hearse. There were only the diggers and crew left, and they were eating lunch. So he headed over to the grave and saw that the vault lid was already in place. He apologized for being late and began to play. The workers put down their lunch and gather around. He played his heart out for this poor man who had no friends or family. As he played "Amazing Grace," the workers began to weep. After he finished and headed back to his car, he overheard one of the workers say: "I never seen nothin' like that before. I've been installing septic tanks for 20 years and never had anyone play 'Amazing Grace' over one."

We never know what life is going to throw at us. As Christians we are called to walk in faith and trust that God will provide for our daily needs. And as many of us have hopefully found from experience, the best roadmap for this journey through life is the Bible. It is full of guidance and examples on how we should live in trust and faith each day. And one of the best examples of walking in faith is found in the Old Testament in the story of Abraham and his son Isaac. Let's look at this story from the 22nd chapter of Genesis, the first fourteen verses.

Read Genesis 22:1-14

Now the narrator of this story knows something that Abraham and Isaac did not know: namely, that the whole thing is a test. The narrator, however, either does not know, or at least does not say initially, what the test is. As a consequence, reading the story becomes a test for us as well.

The narrator gives us very few clues as to the nature of the test. We know nothing of what Abraham is thinking throughout this major crisis in his life. We are only told that God has instructed Abraham to take his only child, his heir, the son of God's promise, Isaac, and offer him as a sacrifice on a mountain. At first glance, this flies in the face of all common sense and moral justice. How could God ask Abraham to do such a horrible thing? Years earlier, God had promised Abraham that his descendents would be more numerous than the stars in the sky; and now it appears that the son through which this promise was to be fulfilled is to die at the

very hands of his father Abraham in obedience to God. In addition, this act of obedience is even more puzzling given the fact that God had forbidden human sacrifice and Abraham knew this. Yet Abraham was willing to set aside his understanding of right and wrong to be obedient to God. Remember Abraham did not know this was only a test.

Abraham rose early the next morning, made preparations, and set out on the journey. Can you imagine what must have gone through Abraham's mind in the moments before he fell asleep the night before – if he was able to fall sleep at all? Maybe that was why he was up so early, he didn't sleep. Did he tell his wife Sarah that God had told him to sacrifice their only child, the one that they had waited and hoped for all their life? Did he question the promise that God had made to him years before that they would become parents in their old age? Abraham and Sarah had laughed out loud when God told them that they would have a son even though Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah was 90. Yet, God kept His promise and Isaac, whose name means "he laughs," was born. But now God wants Abraham to sacrifice this special child. What an emotional journey for Abraham – one of faith and doubt, obedience and sadness. Have you ever been on a journey where your faith was tested?

Whatever Abraham thought about in the middle of the night, the Bible tells us that he got up early the next morning and set out for the site of the intended sacrifice. Have you ever wondered what Abraham and Isaac talked about as they made this journey of faith? Abraham knew what was going to happen, but Isaac didn't have a clue of what was in store for him. Did Abraham think about turning back and ignoring God's command? How would God's promise be ultimately fulfilled without Isaac? Would there be another miracle birth to a woman now over 100 years old?

For three days, Abraham and Isaac, and their two servants hiked to a mountain named Moriah. If you study the Bible closely, you will find that some of the events and locations are interwoven throughout its stories. For example, 2 Chronicles 3:1 states that this mountain is the exact location where Solomon will build the first Temple. And that the proposed site of the sacrifice of Isaac was almost within eyesight of Calvary, where God will make the supreme sacrifice centuries later with His Son Jesus Christ on the cross.

Upon arriving at the mountain, Abraham tells his servants to wait there while he and the boy go up the mountain to worship. Then he says something that is very essential to the story – "we will come back to you." We will be back – meaning that both he and his son will return. The 11th chapter of Hebrews tells us that "Abraham figured that if God wanted to, He could raise the dead." Abraham knew that God had promised that through Isaac the covenant would continue on to his descendents. And Abraham knew, as we should know, that God never goes back on His word; He always keeps His promises. If God chose to accept Isaac as a sacrifice, Abraham

trusted that the Lord would give him back his son. This was clearly a demonstration of both trust and faith.

As they hiked up the mountain, Isaac carried the wood, while Abraham carried the fire and knife. Isaac had no idea what was going to happen next. Along the way, he asked his father the obvious question. Everything that they needed to make a sacrifice was there, except the sacrifice. Where is the sacrificial lamb? A chill must have gone up Abraham's back when he heard this question. Where indeed? Abraham's response offers our first clue as to his thoughts: "The Lord will provide."

Up the mountain they went. Like a newspaper article, the writer reports the sequence of events: Abraham prepared the altar, arranged the wood, bound Isaac without resistance, laid him on the altar, and took the knife in his hand ready to slay his only son. The moment of decision had come; what would Abraham do?

Grasping the knife, the father prepares to slay his son as a sacrifice. Abraham clearly demonstrates that he will not withhold anything from God. Just then God intervenes. God wanted Abraham's obedience, not his sacrifice. Speaking through an angel, He says: "Stop Abraham, I know that you are willing to obey me even in this." Then Abraham lifts his eyes and sees a ram caught in the thicket. So he offers the ram that the Lord had provided as a sacrifice on the altar instead of his son Isaac. To commemorate the event, Abraham names the place "The Lord will provide." The Hebrew for "will provide" translates literally "will see to it." In other words, God's seeing to it spared Isaac just as centuries later God's seeing to it spares you and me from our sins through His Son Jesus Christ.

Like Abraham, God holds nothing back when it comes to His children. In reality, God did not ask Abraham to do anything that He would not do. God gave His Only Begotten Son as the ultimate sacrifice so that we would be free from the bondage of sin and could experience true happiness and peace of mind. Do you see the similarities between Jesus and this story? Now this story was written centuries before Jesus was born, but the similarities are too numerous to ignore.

Jesus and Isaac were the only begotten sons; the birth of each was announced by either God or one of His angels; each was a promised child; each was to be the sacrificial lamb; for one, it was a journey of three days to the mountain, and for the other, it was three days in the tomb; each went up the mountain or hill in complete obedience of their father; each carried the wood for the sacrifice – Isaac the wood for the fire and Jesus the cross; Isaac was bound to the wood without resistance, and our Lord and Savior was bound to the wooden cross without resistance; and God provided a ram as a substitute for Abraham's offering, and He provided Jesus as the substitute for our sins. God had promised a Savior for the world. God always keeps His promises; He always provides.

Dwight L. Moody told the story of a family in a Southern town where yellow fever was raging, and there were strict sanitary rules. The moment anyone died, a cart came around and took the body away. The father was taken ill and died and was buried, and then the mother became sick. The neighbors were afraid of the plague; so nobody dared to go into the house. The mother had a little boy and was concerned about his well-being. She was afraid of what would happen to him when she died. So she called the little fellow to her bedside and said: "My son, I am going to have to leave you, but Jesus will come to you when I am gone."

The mother died; the cart came along and she was laid in the grave. The neighbors would have taken the boy in, but were afraid of catching the disease. So the boy wandered around town and finally went to the place where they had buried his mother and sat down on her grave and cried himself to sleep. The next morning he woke up and realized his situation – alone and hungry.

A stranger came along and seeing the little fellow sitting on the ground, asked him what he was waiting for. The boy remembered what his mother had told him and he answered: "I'm waiting for Jesus," and then he told the man the whole story. The man's heart was touched, tears trickled down his cheeks, and he said: "Jesus sent me." To which the boy replied: "Well, you sure took your time coming sir." The boy was provided for. And so are we. God will help us, but there are times when we must wait for the results; we must have the patience and courage like this little boy.

Abraham and this little boy both realized that the end result may not always be what we expect. God works in mysterious ways. The ways of God are sometimes hidden and at first not understood. For example, Abraham didn't expect to find a ram in the bushes.

As I have said before I believe that our prayers are answered in four ways: yes, no, wait, and the one that I don't like sometimes – I have a better idea. God always answers our prayers and He always has a better plan; and more often than not it does not fit our personal desire or our agenda, but in the end is better for us. God in His wisdom knows what is best for us.

Have you been tested lately? Certainly the demands of everyday life sometimes feel like a test. And in those times of crisis, how quickly we tend to forget God's promises? The message for us this morning is clear – God can be trusted to provide. Now it is difficult at times when the solution does not come right away or is not one that we would have chosen. Yet, as Abraham demonstrated, obedience and faithfulness are rewarded.

Now there's always been a mystery in this story for me– if the ram was stuck in the thicket all this time, why didn't Abraham see it sooner? Was he blinded by the weight of his decision?

Sometimes we are so blinded or preoccupied by the circumstances around us, our biases, our personal and selfish agenda, past experiences, doubts, and even fears, that we don't see the ram right in front of us, the solution that God is providing for us – the answers to our prayers. Do you see the life-giving provisions that God offers to you today and every day?

Often we feel overwhelmed by stress, loneliness, despair, or grief. So, the next time you feel like giving up remember this story; ask God to give you eyes to see and ears to hear where He is at work in your life. Who knows? Deliverance may be nearer than you think. May we not be so blinded by our fears and worries that we miss God's abiding presence and provisions in our life. When we trust in God, turn control over to Him, and walk in faith, God sees our obedience and allows us, like Abraham, to see the ram in the thicket. Grace empowers obedience and also gives us a new set of eyes to see with.

Abraham passed the test. He learned that no matter the delay, no matter the obstacles, God fulfills His promises in His way and on His schedule. Here is a trustworthy saying: God provides – all that you may need He will provide; as one of our old hymns says: "God will take care of you." No matter what you are going through right now – declining health, an uncertain diagnosis, cancer or heart disease, loss of a loved one, a broken relationship, or an uncertain future, God is at work around us, particularly on the margins. May we each have visions of faith that look beyond the perimeters and boundaries of life to see the goodness that God provides. Do you see the ram? Walk in faith, trust and obey; walk in the light! God will provide. Amen