

In his classic book, *The Pursuit of God*, A.W. Tozer writes these words:

**Before the Lord made man upon the earth, He first prepared for him by creating a world of useful and pleasant things for his sustenance and delight. In the Genesis account of the creation these are simply called "things." They were meant for man's uses but they were meant to always be external to the man and subservient to him. In the deep heart of the man was a shrine where none but God was worthy to come. Within him was God; without, a thousand gifts which God showered upon him.**

Then Tozer says this: "But sin has introduced complications and has made those very gifts of God a potential source of the ruin of the soul."

Why is that? How might God's gifts ruin our soul? It happens because there's a strong pull within each of our hearts to possess, hold on to, and cling to things with a deep and fierce passion. The more cherished the thing, the tighter our grip, and the more difficult it is to release it.

It might be our possessions: a house, a car, a boat, or even some cherished collection we've kept tucked away for years. It might be our vocation: if you have a job or a calling you prepared for and invested in, you might very well cling to that as if your very worth, identity and security are at stake. It might be your hopes and dreams.

I think of all the Olympians we've been watching and how many of them have seen their dreams for a medal die or be fulfilled this week. For you, it might be the dream of getting married or having kids, or traveling the world. Finally, it might be in the area of relationships: a spouse, a parent we depend on, a brother or sister we enjoy, a son or a daughter over whom we worry constantly. These relationships are gifts, but they can also be idols of the heart. Tozer writes, "The roots of our hearts have grown down into things, and we dare not pull up one rootlet lest we die."

### **Background: God Provides a Son for Abraham**

In Genesis 22, we meet up with Abraham again. There's no question the roots of Abraham's heart grew deep into one particular relationship, and that's with his son, Isaac. You can't blame him. This is the son God promised him decades earlier.

When Abraham was 75 years old, God promised he'd be the father of a great nation. He waited five years and then said to God,

*"You've given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir" (15:3). But God said, "A son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir" (15:4).*

A few years later, Abraham became so desperate he tried to solve the problem by producing an heir through his maidservant, Hagar. But that just produced a whole new set of problems. Finally, at age 99, Abraham said to God, *"Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?" (17:17).* God said, *"Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac" (17:19).* Abraham's response was simply to laugh. Let's face it, at their age, he and Sarah were thinking more about a nursing home than a nursery!

But finally, when Abraham was 100 years old, Sarah gave birth to their miracle baby, a son, and they named him Isaac, which means laughter. Now, both Abraham and Sarah were laughing, not in disbelief, but with joy and wonder. I think the next few years must have been a sweet time in Abraham's life. When we come to Genesis 22, a decade or more has gone by since we last saw him in chapter 21. Isaac is growing into a young man. At the end of chapter 21, Abraham settled in Beersheba, where it says he "called on the name of the Lord, the eternal God." Again, these were good times for Abraham and Sarah. But then something happened, something that must have felt like a bomb exploding.

### **God tests us by calling us to choose between worshipping him and the gifts he gives**

Read to how this part of the story starts.

**Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you." vv. 1-2**

God's command must have shocked Abraham; it shocks us as well. There are three parts to what God instructs Abraham to do. First, he's to take his son. Notice how God identifies him: he's *"your son, your only son, whom you love — Isaac."* There could be no mistaking who God is referring to — not Ishmael, but Isaac. The one he loves like no other.

Second, he's to take him to the region of Moriah. Most scholars agree Moriah is the place King David would later purchase and where Solomon's temple would be built in Jerusalem. Third, and here's where the shock comes, he's to sacrifice Isaac as a burnt

offering. That's a shock to us, but maybe not quite so much to Abraham.

As horrendous as it sounds, it wasn't uncommon for non-Israelites to sacrifice their firstborn to the gods. Later, when God gave his law to Moses, he forbade this practice among the Israelites. But, remember, Abraham didn't have God's law at this point. But he did have God's promise about Isaac. And this is where this didn't make any sense. Why would God promise him a son, make him wait for that son, then miraculously provide a son, only to then command him to kill that son? He and Sarah had waited so long for this son, and now God wants him to sacrifice him as a burnt offering?

What's going on here? Well, the narrator tells us. God has no intention for Isaac to be sacrificed. God is testing Abraham. But Abraham doesn't know that. We test things like food to see if it tastes good. We take tests in school to see how much we've learned. We test ourselves physically in a workout to see what kind of condition we're in. Tests reveal things. God tests us to reveal things about ourselves. It's not that God lacks information; he knows everything! But he still rejoices to see us demonstrate our faith amidst these tests. These tests aren't meant to destroy us but to prove and strengthen our faith. James, in the New Testament, says, *"the testing of your faith produces endurance."* God tests his children.

In Abraham's case, the real test has to do with worship. Making a burnt offering is all about worship. This test will reveal who Abraham will worship. Who's really on the throne of his heart? Who's number one in his life? Is it God, or is it Isaac? There's no middle ground here. God gives him no alternative. Either he worships God and does what God says, or he worships Isaac and doesn't do what God says. Which will it be? Will he worship God or the gift God gives?

Today, we often face the same choice of worshipping God or the gifts God gives. Let's apply that to the areas I talked about earlier. Will we worship God or the possessions he's given us? Lynn and I have a deep conviction that God has given us the house we live in. We really like our house! But there are times God tests us to see if we worship him or our house. Are we willing to make our house disposable for others to use and enjoy and sometimes even to misuse? The possessions we most delight in are the ones God will most often ask us to offer up to him.

Will we worship God or the career/vocation God gives us? My son is a college football coach. He loves what he does. And God has opened up some great opportunities for him in that profession. But college football coaches work crazy hours. And every Sunday morning, he has to make a choice: Will I take two hours to worship God at church with my wife, or will I get a head start on the game film I have to evaluate? At times we must choose between God and the career he's given us.

There are also times when we have to choose to worship God or the hopes and dreams he gives us? I think of a 40-year-old single woman who dreams of getting married and having a family. Along comes a man who is handsome, successful, and so nice. He treats her like royalty. She can see herself falling in love with this guy. But there's one problem: he really doesn't share her passion for God and his kingdom. It's not that he's against God, he goes along with it, but he just doesn't care about the things of God as deeply as she does. She'll have to choose between God and the hopes and dreams God has given her.

Finally, there are times we may have to choose between God and even our most valued relationships, like our own children. Yes, kids are a gift from God. But sometimes we have to make a choice. Isn't this what Abraham had to do? Maybe you want your son or daughter to get into a great university. For that to happen, he or she will need extra tutoring and really buckle down and study five nights a week. But that tutoring will cost you an additional \$800 a month, and that would cut into the money you've already committed to God and his work. And studying five nights a week will mean she misses her youth group meeting where she meets other believers and learns more about God. You may not like to admit it, but you may have to choose between God and your own children's success.

Make no mistake; God tests us by calling us to choose between worshipping him and the gifts he gives. So what did Abraham choose?

### **Abraham chooses to worship God and not his son**

**Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you." vv. 3-5**

The narrative is stark. There's no emotion; few words. Abraham must have been torn up inside. But what stands out to me is his immediate obedience. We see no indication of hesitation, no reluctance, no argument, no bargaining, and delay. It would have been about 50 miles to Moriah—a three-day walk. Abraham certainly had plenty of time to think about this and change his mind. But we hear nothing of that. In fact, there's very little conversation recorded, just instructions about firewood for the offering.

But in those brief instructions Abraham gives to his two servants, we see his mindset. After telling his servants to stay with the donkey while he and Isaac go to the place of sacrifice, he says, *"We will worship, and then we will come back to you."* A couple of things to notice: First, he says, *"We will worship..."* The Hebrew word for "worship" means to fall face down on the ground. It

was a physical expression of humility and homage. Abraham knew in offering up his son; he's being asked to worship God. He knew that was the issue—who will I worship? But also notice the pronouns he uses. He says, *"We will worship and then we will come back to you."* But, wait, if he sacrifices Isaac, it would only he, Abraham, coming back. It's clear Abraham believed somehow, somehow, Isaac would return with him. The writer of Hebrews tells us about Abraham's faith. He says, *"Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead..."* (Heb 11:19a). I don't think he understood how that could happen, but he believed in God's promise that Isaac would be his heir, and he acted on that faith.

Verse 6a says, *"Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife."* Abraham and Isaac head off, with Isaac carrying the wood for the offering. It's just the two of them now, father and son. Imagine the tension Abraham feels; the silence in the text is oppressive. No doubt Isaac has done this before. He knows the routine of doing burnt offerings. But something is missing.

Finally, Isaac breaks the silence by naming the elephant in the room.

**As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?" "Yes, my son?" Abraham replied. "The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" vv. 6b-7**

Isn't it amazing how our children have a knack for naming the very issues we want to avoid! But can you imagine how this innocent question must have crushed Abraham?

But once again, his response reveals his faith. *"Abraham answered, 'God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.' And the two of them went on together"* (v. 8). God will provide the lamb. Literally, this should read, "God will see to the lamb himself." But, how? How will God see to it?

The tension is building, and the narrative picks up pace.

**When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. vv. 9-10**

Now we come to the awful moment. Isaac is passive. He doesn't resist. He could have! I mean, he was strong enough to carry a load of firewood up a mountain. But somehow, in this awful moment, he seemed to trust his father implicitly.

### **God intervenes and rewards Abraham's obedience**

But then, as Abraham's arm was raised, we read, *"But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, 'Abraham! Abraham!' 'Here I am,' he replied"* (v. 11). This is the second time in this story God has called to Abraham by name, and this time twice, and just in the nick of time. As Martin Luther once said, "If God had blinked,

Isaac would have been dead." But he didn't, and for the second time, Abraham responds, *"Here I am."*

*Then God says, "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son"* (v. 12). Abraham passed the ultimate test. God allowed this to play out to the very last second to prove Abraham's faith. God says, "I wanted to see it for myself. You fear me. You worship me and me alone."

And with that, God did exactly what Abraham told Isaac he'd do. He provided a lamb.

**Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place The Lord Will Provide. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided." vv. 13-14**

The Hebrew for the "The Lord Will Provide" is Jehovah-Jireh, which means, "The Lord will see to it." Isn't that good to know? Whatever God calls you to lay on the altar, you can trust the Lord will see to it. Whatever it is you're being called to risk or even lose, the Lord will see to it.

And the Lord will do more for you than just see to it. Look what God says next.

**The angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, "I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me." vv. 15-18**

Is there a payoff for worshipping God rather than the gifts he gives? Absolutely! God tells Abraham that because he worshipped Him rather than his son, he and his son will be far better off! Rarely in Scripture does God make an oath or swear by himself, but he does here. God swears he'll make Abraham's descendants ridiculously numerous; they'll take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through his offspring, all the nations of the earth will be blessed. All this because Abraham worshipped God and not his gifts.

Whenever God calls us to let go of something, we think of it as a loss. And it may indeed hurt us deeply. We may wonder, "What will I do now? How will I survive?" I can't tell you exactly how he'll bless you, but I know he will. Not only will he provide, but He'll also bless you and make you a blessing beyond anything you could imagine. As most of you know, I'm in a season where I have to let go of my ministry at CPC, which I've enjoyed for 35 years. It's familiar to me. It's a sure thing. My own tendency is to

cling to it for dear life. To let go of it is a loss for me. But I have to trust if I'm doing what God has called me to do, he'll provide, and he'll bless and make me a blessing. That may look very different from what I've experienced in the past, but it will be good. The only way we can make those kinds of hard choices is to believe the truth that he will provide; he will see to it.

But we don't always believe that. I recall a scene from the movie *Forrest Gump*. Forrest's mom, played by Sally Field, visits the high school principal she wants Forrest to attend. But the principal tells her Forrest's IQ doesn't meet the standards of the state of Alabama. But Forrest's mom insists. She says to the principal, "My boy, Forrest, is going to get the same opportunities as everyone else. He's not going to a special school just to learn how to retread tires...There must be something that can be done." There is. Forrest's mom sleeps with the principal. Later, the principal tells Forrest, "Your mama sure does care about your schooling, son."

You may not sleep with your son's principal, but that scene reflects the compromises we're too often willing to make so our dreams for our kids or for ourselves will be fulfilled. We'll cut any corner to get what we want. This story in Genesis 22 tells us that is all based on a lie. God's greatest blessings come to us when we chose to worship him and not the gifts he gives.

Maybe you're sitting here today and can think of 1,000 ways you've failed to live up to this ideal. Maybe that story about Mrs. Gump is your story. Maybe you've compromised your convictions and chosen to cling to and worship the gifts rather than the Giver. Let's face it, a story like this can make most of us feel pretty guilty.

Here's the good news: Go back to verse 8. Look again at Abraham's answer to Isaac's heart-wrenching question, "*Dad, where's the lamb for the burnt offering?*" Remember what Abraham said? "*God himself will provide the lamb, my son.*" Later, Abraham called the place "The Lord Will Provide." You see, the same God who provided a sacrifice so Isaac might live provided the ultimate sacrificial lamb for us. His name is Jesus. He's the substitute, slain on the mountain of Golgotha. John the Baptist understood this. That's why when he saw Jesus, he said, "*Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*" Yes, the Lord did provide! He provided his Son, his only Son!

And through that sacrifice, not only did he provide you with forgiveness, but he also provided you the means to obey him. If you know him, you have his life within you. You have his law written on your heart. You have all of his promises. He's given you everything pertaining to life and godliness. So go ahead, worship him

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

alone. Whatever gifts he's given you, hold them loosely. And in doing that, you can be like Abraham at the end of this story. It's like he was a man who had everything, but he possessed nothing.

I want to close with a prayer Tozer penned at the end of his chapter on this very story:

**Father, I want to know you, but my coward heart fears to give up its toys. I cannot part with them without inward bleeding, and I do not try to hide from you the terror of the parting. I come trembling, but I do come. Please root from my heart all those things which I have cherished so long and which have become a very small part of my living self so that you may enter and dwell there without a rival. Then you shall make the place of your feet glorious. Then shall my heart have no need of the sun to shine in it, for you will be the light of it, and there will be no night there. In Jesus' name, Amen.**

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