

God's Grace Reverses Our Place

1) From Losing a Child to Countless in the Family

Genesis 22:1-18 • 2021-02-21 • Series for Lent



It was about 150 years ago when the engineer, James Eads, had an idea to attempt something that had never been done before. He was going to use a newly devolved material, steel, to build what most considered impossible: an arch bridge over the Mississippi River at St. Louis. No one had ever built a structure that size out of steel. He worked with Andrew Carnegie to secure the railroad funds and steel production needed for the bridge. After many years and a few dozen deaths and casualties, the bridge was finally completed. It was the longest arch bridge in the world at that time. It ran the length of over a mile with massive steel ribbed arches crossing the river. It was wide enough for four lanes of pedestrians and carriages with a train railway underneath. The bridge was completed. But it wasn't finished yet. It still needed testing. Of course, Eads, Carnegie and others knew the bridge was sound. But this type of project had never been done before. Many remained skeptical. Apparently at that time not a few bridges ended in collapse because of poor materials and design. This first of its kind bridge was not something people were ready to jump on. So, in 1874 John Robinson, one of the men in charge of promoting the bridge came up with a grand scheme. He decided to build off the common belief at the time that elephants would never venture onto something unstable. So, he arranged for an elephant crossing. The crowd cheered on that June day as the elephant took its first steps onto the bridge. They cheered and followed. It was probably the first time an elephant ever walked over the Mississippi. Further demonstrations included sending multiple locomotives over the bridge. But you can be sure what people remembered years later as they saw that bridge or used it was the elephant. Test passed. Elephant safe. Bridge sound. The builders already knew this. But they needed people to see it.

God, of course, knows all things. He doesn't need to perform tests to know our thoughts, our hearts, or confirm a hypothesis. Nor is he bound to prove anything to anyone. But today we are going to take a walk with Abraham up a mountain. And there we will see God arranging for a test –to help us see how his Word is trustworthy and sound.

Abraham had gone through more tests of faith than most of us go through in an entire lifetime. At the age of 75 he set out to obey the Lord's call to leave his homeland behind. Taking only his wife and nephew, and all his possessions he left without questioning the Lord. He didn't know where; it was just a place the Lord said, "I will show you." God later told Abraham, "Look at the stars! I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky." That was another test of faith because Abraham was already seventy-five and his wife sixty-five. And they still were childless. But we are told Abraham believed God, and God credited him as righteousness. Another test passed. Then after 25 years of waiting Sara gave birth to their son, Isaac. They called him laughter because of the great joy he brought them. They knew he was the fulfillment of all God's promised blessings. They knew God would bless all the people of the earth through this child and his descendants. After that, another test came. Abraham's actual firstborn, Ishmael, was around 12 years old. He began mocking and persecuting the boy Isaac who was just a little toddler. Sara told Abraham, "Get rid of the son of the slave woman." The Lord told Abraham his promises were for Isaac, the son of the promise, not the natural born son, Ishmael. He needed to send away Ishmael. He showed his faith once more as he sent him away, leaving only the promised son. Time and again Abraham's faith proved real –he really did what Luther reminds the first commandment demands, "fear, love, and trust in God above all things."

"After all these things" it seemed like Abraham had passed the test. You'd think now he could now just sit back and enjoy the laughter of Isaac. But you see, if you are still alive, it's because God still has a use for you for service in his kingdom whether great or small. At over 100 years-old Abraham was about to face his greatest test.

Late at night the Lord spoke to Abraham, "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 which I will show you." There was no mistaking the Lord's directive. You didn't give a partial burnt offering. You took the whole life of the animal and offered it on the altar. And it meant you were wholeheartedly dedicated to the Lord. Abraham's test was, "Do you love me more than everything, even your only Son in whom you delight?"

There is no arguing, no negotiating, "Lord, what about a hundred sheep instead? A thousand sheep?" There is no talking it over with Sara, "Do you think we should listen to God this time?" There is not even a delay. "Early the next morning Abraham got up, loaded his donkey, and took two servants and his son" as the sacrifice.

This was not by any means easy. We like to distance ourselves from loss and trauma in life. Politicians and news reporters often call soldiers –who are real people - "boots on the ground." Why? Because they get uncomfortable thinking about the reality of lives lost in war. Doctors might refer to patients who didn't make it through a surgery or recover as "flat lines." They are referring to the monitor that just stops registering life signs. It goes flat. It's hard to handle the loss of life under your care. Parents who commit abortion avoid looking at their child as a human being and never think about it as their child. They coldly distance themselves and call it, "terminating a pregnancy." It is hard to think in terms of losing someone you know as a person. This was Abraham's "one and only son."

Can you imagine? There are many things in our life that we would have a hard time letting go if God asked. Some of those things are even blessings from God. What sort of things are there in your life that you would find hard to let go of and place into God's hands? What would you find most difficult to let go of for the sake of serving the Lord? Think of that which you could never imagine yourself losing. Think of that one most precious and treasured person or thing, "No, Lord, not that." That's what Abraham was asked to give up.

He had to think over his loss for the three-day, fifty-mile trek on foot to Moriah. When they drew near, he knew he could continue the final steps. He took the firewood from the donkey and placed it on Isaac. He told his two servants, "Stay here with the donkey, the boy and I will go up there and we will worship, then we will come back to you."

Did you catch that? Now we get a glimpse of what Abraham was thinking, what caused him to leave all behind in the past. He did not go to that mountain out of fear or compulsion. He called it an act of worship. He acted in faith. And did you catch how he said, "We will go up there, we will worship, and we will come back." I don't think he was trying to fool his servants. These words help us to understand how faith drove Abraham on.

Abraham understood by faith that the Lord would provide everything he promised. God would bless him and all people through his son, Isaac. He held to that promise as trustworthy and sound. He could step out holding to that promise as one which could never fail. "We will return." That makes the sacrifice no less difficult. But it shows Abraham acted in faith, not fear. The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that Abraham reasoned God would raise Isaac back to life. God always provides. All along God had provided for Abraham. And all along Abraham continued to trust that the Lord would provide all things.

Isaac recognized by now that something was missing. He knew that a sacrifice required an offering for the altar. "Father, you have the fire and knife, I have the wood, but what about the sacrifice?" Abraham answers in the way that teaches Isaac to trust the Lord. "The Lord will provide; he'll see to it that we have an offering." After he built the altar, he placed the wood. He then bound up Isaac, his beloved son. He placed him on the altar. He took out the knife. And he stretched out his hand ready to bring the knife down and take the life of his son.

Then the Lord called, "Abraham, Abraham! Don't harm him. Now I know that you fear God, you have not withheld from me your only son." Then Abraham understood. This had been another test. Abraham walked away from that altar knowing that God does and will provide. A ram was found nearby caught in a thicket. It was the one Isaac had questioned about. God had provided the sacrifice. And it was offered up in place of Isaac.

Why did God do this test? He knew all along. He brought Abraham and Isaac to this point to let them understand he can always be trusted. Abraham is like that elephant who crossed the bridge in St. Louis. The bridge was sound. God's promises and mercy would not fail. Abraham stepped onto the bridge while all who read about it wonder... "How!? Why!?" He stands as a clear testimony: "This bridge will hold. The Lord will provide! He has promised. Not even death can stop his promises."

The Lord then assured Abraham once more that his faith was not misplaced. And don't misunderstand. Yes, God did say, "Because you listened to me." But the promises were already given decades earlier. He is now reaffirming his promise so that Abraham knows, "Your faith is not misplaced. It is placed on something solid." Our faith is also placed on his trustworthy and solid promises. We are called righteous through faith like Abraham. He will not fail us but will always provide according to his promises. He does this in his grace for sinners.

The Hebrew phrase here, it is interesting to note, has a double meaning. The words translated, "The Lord will provide" can be read more literally, "The Lord will see." Or as we say in English, "he will see to it." Moses says that the expression remained, "On the mountain of the Lord, it will be provided." It could also be translated, "On the mountain of the Lord, he will be seen."

Whether the double meaning was intended or not the Lord was seen on that mountain. He came as the Lord's provision for this world. He walked among his temple in righteousness. And with a perfect plan of substitution for sinners, Jesus of Nazareth came to that same hill. The one and only Son of God carried the wood up the hill on which he would be sacrificed. It was a sacrifice God the Father had planned and provided from all eternity. The Lord himself was seen. The Lord himself provided the sacrifice. We have life through him. And we know because of the resurrection to life and our living Savior the promise stands. Not even death can change his promise!

It's somewhat surprising to learn that there is still traffic crossing Ead's bridge. But even more remarkable should be how God's promises stand forever true. All who have stepped out like Abraham to walk in faith have found the Lord trustworthy and sound. Is there any sacrifice or provision we could not now give up? We don't do it out of fear, but out of worship and love in faith. That's why the apostle Paul tells us, "He who did not spare his own Son, but graciously gave him up for us all, will he not also along with him graciously give us all things?"

God's grace reverses our place. He changes the loss of everything into gaining everything. He gave up his Son so that he could have countless in his family. They are as numerous as the stars. We now can join with Abraham and countless others to say, "We will go, we will worship, and not matter what comes, even death, we will return."