



ABRAHAM STUDY GUIDE

**A 10 WEEK DEEP DIVE
INTO THE LIFE & WALK
OF ABRAHAM**

QUESTIONS:

1. Has God ever asked anything of you that you do not understand?
2. In the lesson for this week, we noted that human sacrifice is an extreme act of devotion, which our God never asks of us. What are other acts of deep religious piety practiced by followers of false religion that have impressed you over the years, not because the acts themselves are so awesome, but because of the depth of devotion that it takes to carry them out?
3. What is the hardest thing that God asks you to give as an expression of your faith and trust in him?

9: THE TEST

GENESIS 22

AN UNSPEAKABLE REQUEST

Things are going well for Abraham. God has given him the son who had been promised twenty-five years earlier. His very name, Isaac, is a testimony of how God does the impossible. The Lord has taken Hagar and Ishmael under his care, opening a new chapter in their lives. And Abraham is dealing with the mundane challenges of everyday life, securing water for his flocks and maintaining a good relationship with his neighbors in the land of promise.

But there is yet another story to be told. “After these things God tested Abraham.”[1] From the outset, we have insight into God’s purpose, forbidding us from reading Genesis 22 without knowing that this is a test. And that is helpful, because God is about to ask from Abraham the most that can be asked. It is almost unspeakable, not only because of the horror of the action commanded, but because it runs completely contrary to God’s moral character. In this sense, this story is unique among all the acts and words of God in Scripture.

After all these years, every promise to him fulfilled, not expecting anything else from God, God calls to Abraham, and Abraham answers obediently, “Here I am.”[2] Here is a man who does not simply worship God when he wants something.

And then, the tragic words: “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.”[3] Every aspect is a twist of the knife. God asks for a human sacrifice. That sacrifice is to be Abraham’s son. That son is his only son. Abraham loves that son. And he is the one through whom the promise of future descendants who will bless the entire earth will come. But now, Abraham is to take him to a mountain, construct an altar, place wood on it, kill him, cut his body into pieces, and burn him until nothing is left.

GRAPPLING WITH THE UNFATHOMABLE

Without a doubt, this is one of the most difficult chapters in all of Scripture. It is clearly the greatest test of faith Abraham ever had to endure. And it is confusing, since God is so consistently opposed to human sacrifice throughout the Bible[4]—a moral judgment with which not all cultures in that time and place would have concurred. And why is Abraham commended for being willing to carry out this command? For centuries, both Jewish and Christian interpreters have struggled with the moral and theological questions surrounding this story.

A big piece of the puzzle regarding Abraham’s actions has to do with the cultural and religious circumstances in which he lived. The concept of child sacrifice was not completely foreign to Abraham, and while not all cultures



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QUESTIONS:

4. How has God tested your faith? What did you learn about him as a result? What did you learn about yourself?

5. What is the difference between the Lord testing our faith and the Lord tempting us (James 1:12-15)?

practiced human sacrifice, many did. So, when Abraham heard his God command this, it no doubt devastated him, but he may very well have figured, "Okay, I guess this is one more thing I didn't know about my God." Note also that Abraham had extremely strong reasons to know that God was real. His knowledge about God and his words to him were firsthand, and he had seen God work in tangible ways in his life. He was not being commanded by some self-appointed priest or omen reader claiming to speak in God's name. He didn't even read it in Scripture. He heard it from God himself.

But could God issue such a command? Part of the answer may lie in that, of all the pagan religious practice Israel was called to reject, this is the one that would have been regarded as the greatest display of devotion (albeit quite sick). Offerings of the firstfruits of a harvest or the firstborn of the flock pale in comparison with offering one's child. This was the most costly thing that could be given to a god, whether real or imagined.

On the one hand, God wants to establish that his worshipers must never worship him in this way. But he also wants to preserve his glory, part of which is the fact that he is closer to his people than any other god ever could be. But how can that be claimed when there are some people who are so committed to their gods so much that they are willing to sacrifice their children? In asking this of Abraham, God is giving him the opportunity to show that his devotion is rivaled by none.

A TERRIBLE TASK

Abraham's actions are almost cold and thoughtless, as he embarks on a journey which, he believes, will culminate in killing his son. All very matter-of-factly, he rises early, saddles his donkey, gathers his companions, cuts wood, and goes. Just as God HAD told him to "lift up his eyes" to view the Promised Land years earlier,[5] so he lifts up his eyes and sees "the place from afar"—the place where his beloved son will die at his hand.[6] And all this after three days of telling no one the true purpose of their journey.

When he arrives, Abraham tells his servants, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you." [7] Curiously, all three verbs in this statement are in the plural, including the third: "We will come again to you." The writer of Hebrews seizes upon this as a clue to Abraham's mentality: "He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead." [8] Also curious is Abraham's reply when Isaac cluelessly points out that they forgot to bring a lamb for the sacrifice. He tells him, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." [9] It appears that Abraham believes God is going to come through in an unexpected way, and that, just as he had done when he gave him Isaac, he would again do the impossible. Abraham's trust in God's prior promise is unshakeable—through Isaac will all the nations be blessed! So strong is his knowledge of God's fidelity to his word that he can obey him no matter what, and no matter the cost, even when he doesn't understand. This is a complete reversal of the Garden of Eden. There, surrounded by nothing but blessing, Adam and Eve doubted God's goodness and cast aside his command. Here, in the midst of bitterness and loss, Abraham cannot bring himself to do anything but obey his God.

Once they have arrived and constructed the altar, Isaac, in a strange act of obedience to his father, and perhaps to the Lord as well, lies on it. Abraham lifts the knife, and at that moment the angel of the Lord calls from heaven,



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“Abraham, Abraham”—just like he did at the beginning of the chapter. And, as he did then, Abraham answers, “Here I am.” And the response comes: “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” Lifting his eyes and seeing a small ram caught in a thicket, Abraham offers it to the Lord instead of his son. In an echo of his words to Isaac on the way up the mountain, he names the place, “The Lord will provide.”[10]

Abraham has passed the test. As a result, the covenant, in its fullest form so far, is reaffirmed. Solemn and broken, yet thankful and full of faith, Abraham and Isaac return to Beersheba.[11]

Reflecting on this story, many have seen in it a foreshadow of our Lord, the beloved Son of the Father, like Isaac, bearing the wood for his own sacrifice up the slope of a dreadful mountain. On that day, the Lord provided a lamb as well, but not in place of the Son. Rather the Son is the lamb, given in place of us.

[1] Genesis 22:1. [2] Ibid. [3] Genesis 22:2. [4] For example, Deuteronomy 12:31; 18:10; 2 Kings 17:17. [5] Genesis 13:14. [6] Genesis 22:4.

[7] Genesis 22:5. [8] Hebrews 11:19. [9] Genesis 22:8. [10] Genesis 22:9-14.

[11] Genesis 22:15-19.