

# Genesis 22.1–14

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## *A Life of Endurance: suffering*

Amington

Sunday 28 July 2019

The Life You've Always Wanted (14)

### **Abraham and Isaac**

25 years we tried. 25 years! My wife Sarah and I – well she was called Sarai back then, before God gave us new names – we tried to have a child for *25 years*.

Then God visited me one day and he promised me I would be the father of nations – ‘Abram,’ said The Voice, ‘Your offspring will outnumber the stars in the sky, the grains of sand on the beach.’

We were so happy – at last we'd have a family of our own, at last people would stop whispering we must have done something really bad to be punished by God like this. We were so happy.

But after 10 *more* years of trying and not succeeding, Sarah had an idea – ‘Take my servant Hagar,’ she said, ‘And we will have a child through *her*.’ Well it seemed like a good idea at the time – doesn't it always? – after all, it seemed like God had forgotten us – *10 years*.

Surely it wouldn't do any harm to give God a little helping hand?

So I had a son – Ishmael – but things didn't work out so well. We had to send Hagar and Ishmael away when our son Isaac was born.

Isaac. Our son.

15 years after Ishmael was born, along came Isaac. We laughed when three visitors told us we would have our own son – but then we laughed with joy when he was born to us nine months later.

Isaac – even his name means 'he laughs' – we were so happy.

It all seemed so wonderful – we have cared for him and loved him so much. And now this.

A few days ago I heard The Voice call to me: 'Abraham!' he said.

'Here I am,' I replied – I love to hear God's Voice. I'm not always the best at listening, and I don't always get things right. I guess I've learned the hard way that faith means obedience – keeping going, even when it feels as though God has forgotten about you.

The Voice said, 'Take your son, your only son, whom you love – Isaac – and go to Mount Moriah.' A boys trip out, I thought: a bit of hiking, camping, and hunting. I was so busy making plans I almost missed what God said next. But I didn't. I couldn't.

You see the Voice carried on: ‘Take your son, your only son, whom you love – and sacrifice him on the mountain as a burnt offering.’

There was no laughing this time.

How could this be? God had promised that Sarah and I would be parents of nations – that our descendants would outnumber the stars in the sky – how could that be if I sacrifice our only son? I didn’t understand – I was so angry with God.

How could he ask such a thing? What could *he* know about losing his only son, a beloved son?

I was angry with God – and Sarah was angry with *me*. Through the tears, I couldn’t understand – but I knew I must obey. I’ve learned the hard way that faith means obedience, keeping going.

I had to leave early – very early – in case Sarah tried to stop us. For the first part of the trip, we travelled with two of my servants. For three days we walked – *three days* knowing what I must do, begging the Voice to explain. But all there was, was silence, as it had been all those years we waited for our son – for Isaac.

When we got near to the top of the mountain, I told my servants to wait for us. ‘Stay here,’ I said, ‘while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.’

Why did I say that? Why did I say, ‘*We* will come back?’ Was it a slip of the tongue? Was it wishful thinking? Was it a glimmer of hope – my faith? Can God do the unimaginable and bring life to the dead? Standing here now, holding this knife, I don’t know.

As we walked, another voice broke the silence. ‘Father, the fire and wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?’

I wanted to run, far away. How could I answer *that*? What could I possibly say? We had barely spoken for *three days* – I couldn’t, I didn’t know what to say. If the Voice stayed silent, so would I.

But then the words fell out of my mouth, ‘God will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.’ Will he though?

We were together – we *are* here together – and yet I feel so alone. I feel numb – with grief, doubt, pain, anger – and yet I know what I must do. God asked me to trust him, to obey him – maybe one day I will understand. Maybe I won’t. But still I must trust him.

But how can I? Here I am, and here is Isaac, my son – the son of my laughter. The fire is ready, I have the knife – I can’t delay any more. It is time. This boy I held as a baby and laughed, this boy I told stories of the wonderful things God would do for us. This boy – my son. And now this. Why is it so hard? Where is God?

I want to hold us in that moment, as Abraham holds the knife.

God had asked Abraham to do the unthinkable. Everything he had promised Abraham, everything he had given him – he was now about to take away.

Why is it so hard? That question, I cannot answer. At least, I cannot give a satisfactory answer. Like ‘Brexit means Brexit’, obeying God is hard because it’s hard. And it’s hard for *all* of us.

You see, what Abraham experienced, Jesus taught. God asked Abraham to give up *everything* – which is exactly what Jesus asks of his followers. ‘Those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples,’ he said (Luke 14.33).

*Nothing* must come before God in our lives: not even our families. It is a hard teaching, but this is what faith *really* looks like: it’s messy and real, *it’s putting God first*, as Abraham did; he was willing to sacrifice his son, his only son, whom he loved – ring any bells?

And yet, Abraham was no hero. He got so much wrong. Twice he misled people about who Sarah was, because he was afraid and didn’t trust God to keep him safe. He tried to force God’s hand by sleeping with Hagar – which *really* didn’t go well. When God told him he and Sarah would have a son, he laughed in disbelief.

Abraham is an example of faith – not because he was perfect, but because he *kept going*, he *stayed obedient*, even though he didn't understand. The two words I'd use to describe Abraham's faith? **Hopeful obedience**. Even when it seemed absurd – perhaps God would bring Isaac back from the dead? – Abraham kept going.

Abraham does not have perfect faith. He just hangs on. He places himself in God's hands.

*John Ortberg, The Life You've Always Wanted, 219*

Friends, I've been there. Have you? Hanging on by your last fingernail? Why is it so hard? I'm afraid, because it is. The answer the Bible gives isn't to explain, but to tell us how to handle it: with **hopeful obedience**, like Abraham – putting God *first*, before *everything*. But what about the other question – where is God?

Three days earlier God called, 'Abraham!' and he replied, 'Here I am.' Now, as the knife begins to fall, the Voice comes again, 'Abraham, Abraham!' The repetition shows the urgency.

Again, Abraham says, 'Here I am.' Even in this awful moment he is ready to listen to God – he doesn't understand, but he is *here*.

The words are on Abraham's lips, but they are also the answer to the question. Where is God? He is *here*.

God was with Abraham the whole time. He didn't always know it, he tried to go his own way, he got it wrong, he lied, he doubted – but *God never left his side*. God was there, ready to stop him at the moment of sacrifice, ready – with a lamb, caught in a thicket.

Abraham's words were prophetic: God *had* provided a lamb – and not for the last time. Where was God? He was *here*, even though Abraham couldn't see him or hear him, even though Abraham felt alone, even though Abraham felt like he was clinging on with his last fingernail – God was there, holding him fast. Wherever you are, *this is where God is: he is here*. The question is: do we realise?

Suffering alone does not produce the character God wants. We need what Abraham had: suffering with *faith*, hopeful obedience. Why? Because, over time, it helps us see that God *was* and *is* there, holding us fast – even though at the time we didn't feel like he was. And as our eyes of faith develop, so we learn to face new troubles and challenges knowing that God is holding us fast.

But why? Why does he hold us? Because he knows *our* grip is not strong enough. Because he loves us. Because he knows what it's like to lose his only Son, the Son he loves. Because he doesn't ask us to give up more than *he* already has, *for us*. And so he holds us.

Like Abraham, God gave up his only Son – except this time there was no reprieve, there was no lamb in the thicket – because Jesus *was* the lamb, who willingly gave up his life for us, for *you*. In him **alone**, *and no other*, is hope, is forgiveness and salvation, is life.

- There is no other life stronger than death – only Jesus.
- There is no other name that saves – only Jesus.
- There is no other way to the Father – only Jesus.
- There is no other safe passage through this life – only Jesus.
- There is no other forgiveness – only Jesus.
- There is no other who can hold you fast – only Jesus.

Jesus doesn't ask for perfect faith. Jesus doesn't ask for perfect faith because *his* faith *was* perfect. He simply asks us to come – to *him* alone – and place our lives in *his* strong hands.

Like Abraham, we all struggle with doubts and mistakes and slip-ups – but *don't let those doubts keep you away from Jesus*. Remember Abraham – he *kept going* in *hopeful obedience*.

So come to Jesus, and to him *alone* – forget other gods, ignore the deceitful desires in your heart – come to *Jesus* because in him and only in *him* is life. So, if you want to *live*, you need to come to *him*.

And *he* will hold you fast, *no matter what*.