

Hearing the Questions of Children
Genesis 22:1-14

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David Harju, a senior at Centennial High School, took the SAT test and scored a perfect 1600 on it this Spring. How did David feel about it? “Ecstatic,” said *Tennessean* staff writer, Barbara Moore.

The Old Testament story we step into today is the life and death test of one man’s faith and obedience. Father Abraham feels directed by God to sacrifice his only son as an act of worship on Mt. Moriah. Suddenly, this boy who has brought laughter to a couple in their elder years, is surrounded by a trail of tears. It is a hard story, a bizarre story, a story for mature audiences only. Yet, it stands as a shining example of one man’s faith and God’s power to provide.

Let us first of all consider this story through the eyes of Isaac. This dream child of Abraham and Sara is raised with love and unusual devotion. His name means *laughter* and he brings great joy to his parents. His mother even manages to excommunicate Isaac’s half-brother, Ishmael, into the wilderness so that there would be no sibling rivalry. Isaac had it all. When his daddy drags him out of bed before daylight to make this mysterious, frightful trip into the unknown, I can only imagine the kinds of questions that had to be on the young adolescent’s mind.

The first question I would have asked is, “Where are we going? It is summer time. Years ago, about this time of the year, I remember loading our two boys into a borrowed station wagon and heading for Florida for a week’s stay in a loaned condominium. We were about 50 miles away from home when the questions started from the back seat. “Are we there yet? How much further? Can we stop now?” That is when our oldest son (back in the days before seat belts) leaned over the back seat and put his arms around my shoulders and said, “Dad, when we get to where we’re going, where will we be?” Inquiring children always want to know.

“Is this a camping trip, Dad? Why isn’t Mother coming? How long will we be gone?” Questions like these had to come from Isaac’s lips.

Several years ago, Richard Gregory Rodriguez rode a roller coaster for 1,013 1/2 hours over a period of 47 days to break his own world record. The trip left Richard with badly bruised knees, a red face that looked like a peeled tomato, and total exhaustion. Worst of all, he wound up right back where he started. Is life anything more for you than an roller coaster ride? When you get to where you are going, will you be where God has directed you to be? Consider the questions of children!

Isaac's second question is in the text, verse 7: "Will there be a sacrifice when we get there, Dad? We've got the wood, we've got the fire but where is the lamb?" Isaac knew to worship God meant to give up something, to delay something, to surrender something, to forego something. It meant a lamb without blemish, the best of the flock. Why would they be heading to worship without the essentials for worship?

Sacrifice! What a strange word for Americans. We come to worship in the 21st century hoping to get something out of it, to assess it, and comment on it on our way home. But bring something to it? That is strange to us. To ask anyone to delay a gratification, to give up a possession, to forego a pleasure, even for God's sake, is strange in our culture. But Isaac asked the question.

When we introduced the word *sacrifice* a few months ago, one of our members came to me and said, "Howard, you have a lot of nerve to be talking about sacrifice in Brentwood, Tennessee. In reflection, it seems children understood it best.

Of course, the sacrifice God desires most is not an animal, but us. St. Paul concludes his treatise on the righteousness of Abraham in Romans 12:1 by saying "I appeal to you brothers and sisters to offer yourselves as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God which is your spiritual act of worship." We used to sing it this way:

Is your all on the altar of sacrifice laid?

Your heart does the spirit control?

You can only be blest, and have peace and sweet rest,

When you give him your body and soul.

Where is the sacrifice, Dad? You are supposed to give something in worship, primarily yourself.

I think there was another question on Isaac's mind. I can't prove he asked his daddy this question, but I know the children of the world are still asking it today. "Will you be there?" In the moment of great trial, "Will you be there?"

For twenty-six years my wife was a public school teacher. The last eight years she taught kindergarten in a very tough classroom. She spent more time in social work than she did in school work. It is hard to study even as a little child when you come to school hungry. Her students said to her one day, "Mrs. Olds, you don't know how lucky you are. You live in a brick house. Bullets won't go through brick houses. You are a very fortunate person."

On the second day of kindergarten one year, a little boy came up to her and said out of the blue, "Mrs. Olds, why didn't you come?" And she not knowing what on earth he was talking about, knelt down to him and said, "What do you mean, why didn't I come?" He said, "Why didn't you come when my mama died?" She said, "I'm so sorry, I didn't know your mother had died, how did it happen?" He looked up to her and with tears in his eyes said, "Well,

everybody knew it, it was on the television. My daddy choked my mama to death. Why didn't you come?" I can never quite forget the echo of that child's question in my mind—"Why didn't you come in my hour of need?"

Those of us at the Annual Conference last week learned that the children in Kamina, Africa eat, at best, only twice a week. Somebody has got to be asking, "Why didn't you come?" When you recognize that 20% of American children today live in poverty, somebody ought to be asking, "Why didn't you come?" When you realize that 879,000 children in the year 2000 were victims of child abuse, somebody has got to be asking, "Why didn't you come?" Whatever you do with this story from Genesis, it is no invitation to mistreat children. You see, Isaac trusted his father completely. Can you?

Abraham takes all the questions of his young son and answers them with a profound ritual that is repeated throughout this old story. With every question there is this answer: *THE LORD WILL PROVIDE*. Have you enough faith to proclaim that to your children? *The Lord will provide*.

God will provide faith for the journey. God and Abraham had climbed too many mountains already for him to stop now. And as impossible as it all seems, Abraham gets up early one morning and sets out for Mt. Moriah. Somebody once said that when things get difficult, don't pray for smaller mountains, just ask for increased climbing ability, because the Lord will go with you when it is difficult.

Teddy Roosevelt once said, "It is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly... who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself in a worthy cause, who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who have never known neither victory nor defeat." 2

Abraham travels on when he does not have a clue where God is leading and when he cannot understand for the life of him, what God is saying. He walks by faith through the journey. Do you trust God that way? *The Lord will provide*.

Isaac trusted his daddy, but Abraham trusted God. V5: "We will worship and then we will be back." What kind of faith empowered Abraham to believe that *the Lord will provide* faith for the journey.

The Lord will provide insight for the moment. The drama is almost too much for civilized people. We shutter when Abraham arranges the wood. We gasp in disbelief when the boy is tied down and, in that micro-second between the raising of the knife and the release of the wrist that would have ended his own son's life, the angel of the Lord cries out, "Abraham! Abraham!"

It is almost like watching an Indiana Jones movie. In that dramatic moment of decision, when Abraham *almost* sacrificed his son, *God provided*. Would you think about that word for a moment....*almost*. I do not know what your life has been like, but I have lived my life in the *almosts*, in the *nearlies*, *not fars*, the *close calls*. I have lived in those squeaky moments when it could have gone either way. When I think about the choices I *almost* made, paths I *almost* followed and the temptations I *almost* surrendered to, I thank God today for not deserting me in the *almosts* of my life. In the critical moment where life hangs in the balance, God speaks. Oh, give me the ability to hear his crying out in the night—*Wait a minute, Abraham, you don't understand. This is not the way it is. You've misunderstood all along.*

God's hand provides. It might be an act of worship for Canaanites to sacrifice their children, but there is nothing right about you doing it!

I urge you this morning to remember that the next time you are tempted to sacrifice your children on the altar of greed, in the pit of some passion, or in the service of some lesser God. In the moment of great trial, God calls you by name. Look up and listen to that voice—He is calling for you.

The Lord will provide. He will provide faith for the journey. He will provide insights in the critical moments of life. He will provide blessings for all time. Verses 17-18 say, "I will surely bless you and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed."

Isn't this an interesting postscript to an old story? Most of the time we don't read it. We didn't read it today. Abraham is considered the father of 3 great world religions. Jews, Muslims, and Christians all call Abraham, father. Could Father Abraham still be a blessing in our terror-stricken world that we have inherited together? Jesus said in John 8:56 "Your father, Abraham, rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day, he saw it and was glad." In America's best-loved hymn we continue to sing,

*And when I think that God his son not sparing,
Sent him to die, I scarce can take it in.
That on a cross, my burden gladly bearing
He bled and died to take away my sin.*

In the obedience of Abraham, we glimpse the faithfulness of God who was willing to sacrifice his only son for our salvation. The obedience, the righteousness of one man continues to be a blessing for Christians like us.

Somebody said that people are a lot like tea bags, you never know their real strength until you put them in hot water. On Mt. Moriah Abraham passed the test. Perfect score. But, you know something else? God passed the test, too. Abraham obeyed, but God provided and by faith you and I can discover the nature of the God whose hand has provided all that we need. *The Lord will provide*. Thanks be to God.

NOTES

1. Barbara Esteves-Moore, "Centennial's Harju Scores Perfect 1600, The Tennessean/Williamson A. M., June 10, 2003, p. 1W, cols. 3-6.
2. John Eldredge, Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secrets of a Man's Soul, Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, Tennessee, 2001

