

God Said Do What?

Let me begin this morning by asking you a very pointed and personal question.

Have you ever set your heart to seek the Lord?

Notice I did not ask you if you have ever sought the Lord...

... I asked have you ever “set your heart” to seek the Lord?

You see, if we don't set our hearts to seek God, His kingdom, His righteousness, then our religious lives will decline into paganism and humanism.

Human nature is such that everyone is drawn to seek something or someone to worship.

There isn't anyone who doesn't seek something ...

... but if we just follow the desires of our flesh or our feelings we will seek the inconsequential, the earthly ... the false and the trivial

We've must set our Hearts to seek after the Lord Jesus Christ!

Listen to me ...there are people who say, “**I don't know if there is any hope.**”

... look how bad things are ... how bad things are getting.

I don't care how things look to you and me ...

...we serve a God who, when His people seek after Him, He lets them find Him.

What concerns me today is **not** “will God let us find Him”

...my concern is “will we seek Him?”

The failure is never on God's part ... it's always on the part of humanity.

... Our ONLY hope is to seek the Lord and if we will seek Him ... we will find Him.

... If God's people will draw near to Him ... He will draw near to us.

In the Christian life there are two words that are very close to each other ...

... those two words are Faith and Surrender.

Today we are going to see in the life of Abraham just how close these two words are.

(Gen 22:1-18) Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ² He said, "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you." ³ So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. ⁴ On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from a distance. ⁵ Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go over there; and we will worship and return to you." ⁶ Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son, and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. ⁷ Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." And he said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" ⁸ Abraham said, "God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together. ⁹ Then they came to the place of which God had told him; and Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood, and bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ¹² He said, "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me." ¹³ Then Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up for a burnt offering in the place of his son. ¹⁴ Abraham called the name of that place The LORD Will Provide, as it is said to this day, "In the mount of the LORD it will be provided." ¹⁵ Then the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, ¹⁶ and said, "By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. ¹⁸ "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice."

If I understand what I just read it seems that God has just commanded Abraham to sacrifice (kill) his son Isaac.

This story is unbelievable ... and honestly a bit disturbing.

Some people have read this story and said, “This is exactly why I don’t go to church.”

...What kind of God/Diety would command someone to sacrifice their son...

... and what kind of twisted abusive father would be willing to do it?”

I hope today that you will listen well because I am **not** going to avoid this story...

... I’m not going brush the surface and just give you some empty religious platitudes.

God has something here in this text for us to learn,

... something that will help us in our relationship with Him.

... something that will enlarge our understanding of faith and surrender.

In all honesty this is not a story designed to make us want to be like Abraham...but it does makes us stand in awe of Abraham, and the deep spiritual and emotional experience this must have been.

There is a famous **Rembrandt** painting of this story that I have used in today’s PowerPoint.



... I'm not sure how well you can see this picture

... but in this painting Abraham is looking up toward heaven rather than at his son

... his large hand is completely covering the face of Isaac which is preventing Isaac from seeing or crying out.

Not only is Isaac silenced, his face is completely obscured.

In Rembrandt's painting the boy is turned into an object....

... the interpretation of the painting is that Isaac has been dehumanized by being made into a sacrifice.¹

Now this story raises three really hard questions.

- Why would God test Abraham this way?
- Back in Genesis 18 we see Abraham arguing with God for the lives of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah ... so why does he not argue with God for the life of Isaac, his only son?
- Is it OK for us to kill people if we think God commands it?

Honestly these are all legitimate questions! That is why the story is so troubling!

It would have been entirely reasonable for Abraham, after God spoke to him, to have concluded that he was hallucinating or having a dream...

... I mean Abraham and Sarah had waited 25 years for God to keep His promise and give them a son

... Why God would ask Abraham to give up his son now after they waited 25 years for him.

¹ Alice Miller, *The Untouched Key: Tracing Childhood Trauma in Creativity and Destructiveness*, p. 139. Quoted in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 1, p.499.

... Isaac was the promised one!

“Sarah there is no way that God has asked me to sacrifice Isaac, I must have just eaten some spoiled meat maybe the wine was too strong, and I got drunk.”

To me it seems that it wouldn't have taken much thinking for Abraham to have dismissed this “voice from heaven” as a delusion or heat stroke.

It would be easy to rationalize and dismiss this story...

... that is certainly what religious skeptics and liberals want us to do.

...But, we cannot and will not gloss over this text ...

... We believe the Word of God is exactly that...God's Word for humanity...

... it is infallible, inerrant, and inspired ... and there is great power in every bit of it.

1. What is God's Purpose for giving Abraham this command?

As I have already mentioned ...

... After waiting his whole adult life, and 25 years after God first promised it, God has given Abraham a son.

There is no question that Isaac was Abraham's greatest delight.

There is a point to be made here.

God doesn't have any problem with us loving and delighting in earthly things ...

... just so long as our love for those earthly things doesn't become greater than our love for God.

... This is part of what is happening in this story ...

... God is testing Abraham so that Abraham will know whether or not his love for Isaac or God is greater.

One of the divine roles that God, our Father, plays in our life is that He works in our lives to

- ... keep our love for HIM first
- ... to help us not become a slave to things and possessions.
- God did that with Job
- God did that with King David
- Aaron and the golden calf
- Isaiah in Isaiah 6
- Peter (Satan wanted to sift Peter like wheat)
- Paul (thorn in the flesh ... so that God's strength would be made perfect in Paul's weakness)

God is not against you being wealthy, but He against you loving money more than you love Him.

So ... if one of God's children become too infatuated with earthly things, God often steps to do whatever necessary to help that person get their priorities back in order.

... that's how much God loves his children.

This was the case of Abraham.

A.W. Tozer said this, "*The way to a deeper knowledge of God is through the lonely valleys of soul poverty and abnegation of all things.*"²

A poor man is no more holy than a rich man or vise-versa ...

However, if you live your life wrapped up in "getting and having" then you will never know the deep spiritual richness that is possible in your relationship with God...

² A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*.

... if you want your intimacy with God to grow then HE has to matter more than the stuff.

In Genesis 22 God is taking Abraham through this difficult and bitter experience—

- ... not because He hates Abraham,
- ... or because He is punishing Abraham,

God is taking Abraham through this valley of sorrow in order to bring Abraham into the wonderful freedom and blessedness that can only be found in a life that puts God before everything else.

Hear me today!

We must be more possessed by the wonder of **who He is** and **what He has done** than we are with getting and having stuff.

God says to Abraham, give me...*your son ...your only son ...Isaac...whom you love!*

... God is putting Abraham through the process of purification.

God is going to reveal to Abraham and us that He and He alone remains on the throne of Abraham's heart.

2. What is God's Command?

Genesis 22:2 *He said, "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you."*

In our text we watched as this little group approaches the place of sacrifice.

Abraham tells the servants to wait so he and Isaac can go on alone...

... from this point forward every step forward increases the tension in the story.

Abraham places the wood on Isaac's shoulders, and they walk on together in silence...father and son.

Finally, Isaac asks his father this innocent heart-breaking question

... *"Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering*

.... And Father Abraham responds

God will provide for Himself the lamb ... and they continue to walk.

Finally, these two men reach the holy place of sacrifice, the altar is built and the wood placed upon it.

This story seems almost too orderly, ...too simple, ...too easy:

And Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood, and bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.

There is no indication of Isaac resisting

... no mention of Isaac screaming out, crying, struggling or attempting to run away.

The knife is drawn; Abraham raises it into the sky...

It is a moment when we are holding our breath.

This is going to happen!

How can a Holy God allow such a thing?

And then the voice: *Abraham ...do not lay your hand on the boy....*and we all exhale.

"Abraham, Abraham!" "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now, I know that you fear God.

... Didn't God already know that Abraham feared him.

Was God on a fact-finding mission?

No! This was **not** about God learning ...

This was about Abraham learning ... about himself and his relationship with God.

Then as the story goes: *Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up for a burnt offering in the place of his son.*

WOW!

3. What is God's lesson for us here?

On the surface this is a beautiful story of a Godly father, a loving son and their collective obedience ... but it goes deeper.

But, what exactly is God saying—isn't this a human sacrifice?

That certainly is what it sounds like.

... or at least it would have been if Abraham had been allowed to follow through.

But that is only what you see if you have a narrow view.

Here is what is happening—

... The God who gave Abraham the son, is now exercising His right to take the son back.

Martin Luther once read this Bible story for family devotions.

When he had finished his wife Katie said, "I do not believe it. God would not have treated his son like that."

"But, Katie," answered Luther, "That is exactly what He did."

In fact, this is not merely the story of a sacrifice ...

This is the story of two sacrifices... the sacrifice of the father and the sacrifice of the son.

Abraham, in his heart, gave up his only son to God ...

... and Isaac, in his heart, gave up himself in surrender to the will of his father.

What we are seeing in this story is the very nature and activity of God in his love affair with humanity.

Abraham is a picture of our Father God ... and **Isaac** is a picture of Jesus the Son of God.

Admittedly this narrative is shocking and confusing for those who have never experienced the sacrificial love of God.

Soren Kierkegaard declared that God was unethical in making such a demand on Abraham.

Ellie Wiesel believed that God expected Abraham to refuse and disobey the command and was shocked when Abraham didn't.

Laurence H. Kant asks, what kind of deity would torment a person with this kind of misery?³

The problem with Kant, Kierkegaard, and Wiesel is that they are not believers and they are not reading this text through the glorious light of New Testament revelation.

Stop and "think about the size of Abraham's knife. ..It had to be able to split the sternum and pierce the heart in one swift, shattering action."⁴

The technology did not exist to make steel or iron and therefore long strong blades did not exist in

³ Kant, Laurence H. "Arguing with God and Tikkun Olam: a response to André LaCocque on the Aqedah." *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (September 1, 2005): 203

⁴ Gamble 327

that day... it would have been made of softer metal and therefore short.

... so Abraham would have had to raise his arms over his head to get enough momentum to do the deed.

With only the Old Testament we are left to ask, how could Abraham have followed through in obedience with such a command?

... **The writer of Hebrews tells us.**

¹⁷ By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; ¹⁸ it was he to whom it was said, "IN ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS SHALL BE CALLED." ¹⁹ He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type. (Heb. 11:17-19)

Abraham's faith in the promises of God gave him the strength he needed to fully surrender to God.

Abraham's trust in God is extraordinary ... but so was **Isaac's faith in God and in his father Abraham.**

The altar was built; the wood was laid; Isaac was bound and placed upon it.

... Trust me ... Isaac could see where this was going...

... and Isaac did not resist.

Please hear me today!

Abraham's love for God, in that moment, took priority over Abraham's love for his son Isaac.

Stay with me:

... In the same exact way Calvary is the moment where God's love for humanity took priority over God's love for his own Son Jesus.

Not only did Isaac surrendered to being killed by his father, he carried the wood necessary

for his sacrifice...

Is not this the picture of our **Lord Jesus Christ** carrying His cross to Calvary?

Isaac willing allowed himself to be laid upon that altar, even though he knew it was breaking His father's heart.

Jesus willing went to Calvary, knowing his dying and bearing our sin would break his father's heart.

The pain of God the Father brought pain to Jesus

... and when God the Father turned his back on His son, Jesus expressed His own pain crying out, *"My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me."*

Abraham told his son Isaac, *"God will provide himself a sacrifice."*

Calvary was God providing Himself a sacrifice for us.

Who would not want to serve a God like our God??

Let me end this sermon by asking you a very pointed and personal question.

Have you ever set your heart to seek the Lord?

In case you didn't know let me tell you...

... we worship and serve a God who, when His people seek Him, He lets them find Him.

When we set our hearts to seek God, faith and surrender come together and God is glorified!