

God's Faithfulness #3

Nelson Cathedral

June 28, 2026

OT Genesis 22: 1-14

NT Romans 6: 12-23

Gospel Matthew 16:21-26

Introduction

In 1994, Lee-ann was the Diocesan Youth Worker for the Christchurch Anglican Diocese, and she organised a youth trip to the sister Diocese of Sabah, Malaysia on the Island of Borneo.

In planning for the trip, we prepared a number of items to perform – Biblical stories set to music that could be acted out. One of them was this story from Genesis 22, the well-known account of Abraham and Isaac and this scene of Abraham preparing to sacrifice his only son and God's provision of the ram

at the very last moment. This is one of the most dramatic scenes in the whole Bible.

As we come to the events of Genesis 22, our focus has been on the grace and faithfulness of God. We have seen God establish a covenant with Abraham and last week heard of God's visitation and the promise of a child to Abraham and Sarah.

Now we have arrived at the point where this promise has been fulfilled, but not without some speedbumps. Abraham and Sarah took matters into their own hands, and in normal cultural practice, Abraham had a child with Sarah's servant maid Hagar.

But now everything was going smoothly, Sarah became pregnant in her old age and gave birth to a son, Isaac. For Abraham and Sarah, even though life may have had its ups and downs, as life does for us all, now there was stability, security and permanence as God's promises were being fulfilled.

God's Request.

The arrival of Isaac represented God's covenant blessing, the first born of the promised great nation. And now God spoke once more, "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 that I shall show you".

Say what!

If these accounts are all about revealing the character of God, why would God, the God of grace and faithfulness ask such a horrible and cruel thing – what is going on? This command appears absurd.

The idea of child sacrifice sounds terrible to our ears, and the opposite we would expect of God. But it was widely practiced by other cultures in Abraham's day to appease the gods.

And following such a request, it seems strange that we do not see Abraham object and reason, even fight

with God. Instead, it is almost taken as a reasonable request, so Abraham goes as instructed.

It is hard to imagine what that 3-day journey was like. Abraham would have been distraught and grieving no doubt, and don't forget Isaac was old enough to know the purpose of this trip as he carried the wood, even if he did not know the specifics.

Abraham's faith

So, what is the point of all this as we read in verse 1 - why does Abraham need testing? What is the quality or attribute in him that needs stretching to its absolute limit?

There is a sense that we can see here the level of faith and confidence that Abraham had in God. The belief that God knows what he is doing....even if Abraham does not.

But the central issue that is being tested is Abraham's faith, but more specifically the possibility that Abraham and his descendants may be more

attached to the blessings and benefits of the covenant, than to God himself.

Has Abraham's faith so far been motivated by personal gain or simply by his love for God? This is yet to be determined and is a question for Christians throughout the ages.

If we look back at Abraham's story, we can see that every other sacrifice that God had asked of Abraham – leaving his land, home, and family - was balance with a promise of more. But now there is no promise to balance the potential loss of his beloved son Isaac.

And in that moment of raising his knife, three things happen.

1. First Abraham demonstrates by his action that God and God alone motivated his faith because he was willing to give up all that he stood to gain, all he loved and all he hoped for.

2. Second, it is God who stays Abraham's hand and provides a substitute - a ram caught in the thorn bushes. The word translated as "provide" in verse 8, means simply "to see" and in this case means the details will be taken care of, as in the phrase "will see to it...". God will see to it...God will provide.

3. And third, in verse 12 we see the purpose fulfilled in God's words, "I know you fear God, since you have not withheld your son". Abraham's faith was in his relationship with God - it was not focused on what he might have gained from this relationship. And so, his unswerving trust in God was expressed by his willingness to act, in the faith and confidence that God is faithful to his promises and will provide.

As one commentator put it, “Isaac is a gift who embodies God's promise of blessing, land and nationhood. The test is one of obedience and trust. In essence it is a test of Abraham's relationship with Yahweh. It asks whether Abraham's trust is really in God, and not simply on what God had promised”.

And as we know, God did provide, and furthermore in verses 15-18, God re-affirms his covenant even swearing by God's own name. It is God alone who will provide what is required to fulfil the covenant.

US

1. As we reflect on this part of Abraham's life, today's reading is a story of faith and obedience, where the challenge is also there for us as we too are faced with the same question, “are you willing to follow God even if there is nothing in it for you”. Is knowing God - experienced fully in our relationship with Jesus -enough?

This is not a cost-benefit analysis, this is about trust and unconditional love for God no matter what.

The ups and downs of Abraham's life reflect the ups and down of our lives. And we can see the same pattern in the experience of other biblical figures such as Joseph sold into slavery (Abraham's great grandson) and the story of Job who lost everything and still trusted God.

There are the examples of the first disciples, the early martyrs, even today the persecuted church where people are willing to risk everything for the sake of knowing and loving Christ.

This same attitude is reflected in our New Testament and Gospel readings summed up in Jesus' words, “if any of you want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me”.

Or as Paul states, a new life of holiness because you have been made right with God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This relationship with God is enough above all else, and the promised gift is eternal life with God.

2. There is also a clear connection in God who provided the ram in place of Isaac's life, and God who has paid the ultimate price in the sacrifice of his Son so that we can be free from sin and death.

If we can marvel at the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son because of his love for God, how much more can we be amazed at God's willingness to sacrifice himself, his Son, because of his love for us. Jesus' sacrifice has once and for all, provided the way for us to be made right with God and a new covenant established.

3. And finally, as we once more see the faithfulness of God in this encounter, we also see how personal our relationship with God can be.

- God is the God of the long-term and the big details. The overarching story from creation to eternity.
- But we also see that God is also interested in the short-term and the small details, including the ups and downs of daily life.
- Part of the lesson for Abraham and for us is that nothing is too big or too small for God. In fact, in the whole of life, we can trust God through all of it, because God promises to hold us in his embrace.

Conclusion.

Simply knowing about God is not enough, neither is believing in God for what we get out of it – even if that is couched in terms of blessing. Our call is to know God personally through knowing Jesus, because in Jesus, God has provided the way for us

to be made right with Him through the sacrifice of his Son.

And in deepening our relationship with God, we grow in our understanding of the grace and faithfulness of God, trusting and leaning into Jesus more and more, through all that life brings, as we draw close to God and realise that God does provide.

Amen.