

November 6, 2011

Sermon Overview:

How much will it cost me to follow God? It is a question for all of us: whether we are just starting to check out Christianity or whether we have been Christians for a long time. In Luke 14:28, Jesus told a large crowd of people who were following him: *which of you desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost?* Jesus was saying, “Before you follow me, count the cost.” Genesis 22 is one of the clearest pictures we have of what it costs to follow God. It’s a story about how God tested Abraham’s faith and obedience. We approached this text by looking at it through the lens of three questions.

How much does God require of me? Out of all God’s good gifts, Isaac was the one Abraham cherished most. All Abraham’s hopes were bound up in Isaac. It was through Isaac that Abraham’s offspring would be named (Gen 21:12). And here God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac as a *burnt offering*. A burnt offering was the most common sacrifice and symbolized the whole-hearted devotion of the worshipper (the animal represents the worshipper). In offering Isaac, Abraham was surrendering all his hopes; in offering Isaac as a burnt offering, he was surrendering himself. What Genesis 22 tells us is that God demands everything.

What does this look like practically? Abraham paints a picture for us what total self-surrender looks like. Abraham neither disputes, delays, nor resists. He answers God’s call and commands decisively, without hesitation, and in spite of how severe the command sounded and how nonsensical it seemed. He doesn’t put off costly obedience until he understands or in hopes that God will change his mind. Instead, he does the next practical thing. *He saddled his donkey. He cuts the wood. He arose and went.* Obedience often starts with doing the next practical thing, even when God’s commands are severe, even when his ways don’t make any sense.

But Abraham’s obedience would not end there. It took three days for Abraham to reach his destination. If he was waffling, he had time to back out. For three days he had to marinate on what was about to happen. How did he keep going? How was he able to complete the task? The answer seems to lie in verse 8, when Abraham says to his son: “*God himself, will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering.*” Somehow Abraham’s faith was so great that he knew that he and Isaac would walk down the mountain together. Abraham believed God’s promises even when those promises seemed to be jeopardized by the very obedience God required.

Is following God worth it? Why follow God? The answer to that question is found in what happens next. When Abraham was a moment away from slaughtering his child, the angel of the LORD stops him: Abraham then sees a ram which he offers as a substitute for Isaac. So overwhelmed was Abraham by the Lord’s provision, that he named the place “*The LORD will provide*”. Through this test, Abraham’s faith was perfected, because for faith to be perfected, it must be enacted. But more importantly, through this test Abraham gained an experience of God as a God who provides. And for centuries to come, whenever an Israelite would come into the temple and in faith offer there a whole burnt offering, they would be reminded that no matter what they were facing, they could commit their ways to God, because “on the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.”

Questions for Preparation and Discussion Note that some questions are designated for preparation (P) and some for group discussion (D). Study based on the English Standard Version

Getting to Know Each Other:

1. Describe a time in your life that was very hard, but one that you are glad you went through, even though you would never want to go through it again [D]

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Looking at the Bible:

1. Read Genesis 22:1–19. What thoughts and emotions do you experience when you read this passage? Which are comforting? Which are disturbing and even terrifying? Why? [P/D]
2. Read Deuteronomy 6:1–9; 10:12–22; and Micah 6:8 [P]
 - a. From these texts try to summarize what God requires of people. [P/D]
 - b. What justification, if any, do these texts give for these requirements? [P/D]
 - c. How, if at all, do you think the requirements change in the New Testament? [D] Now read Luke 14:25–33. How does your answer compare with Jesus’ words? [D]
 - d. How would you describe these duties to a person considering the Gospel? “The Lord requires _____ from you.” [D]
3. What are some reasons God might test people? Use Exodus 20:20; Deuteronomy 13:3; 2 Chronicles 32:31; and Judges 2:22–3:4 to help you answer. [P]
 - a. Why do you think God tests Abraham? [D]
 - b. Place yourself in Abraham’s situation. What is he likely thinking? Feeling? [D]
 - c. Is it fair for God to test Abraham like this? What makes you say that? [P/D]
4. How does Abraham respond to the test? [P]
 - a. What specifically does Abraham do that surprises you? [D]
 - b. What lies behind Abraham’s words to his servants (v5)? Denial? Protection? Faith? Is there anything in the text that causes you to answer that way? [P/D]
5. What did Abraham learn from this encounter? [D]
 - a. What did the first readers of this narrative learn from it? [D]
 - b. What do we learn from it? [D]
 - c. How does the location, mount Moriah, contribute to the meaning of this story? [D]

Looking at Our Hearts

1. What is the greatest test God could give you? [D]
 - a. Why would that be the greatest test? [D]
 - b. What specific reasons might God have for testing you? [P/D]
2. Are there any places in your life that you feel are off limits for God to demand? What are they? What keeps you from giving those things to God?
3. On his way to Moriah, Abraham told Isaac: “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering” (v8). In order to fulfill the test, Abraham had to believe that God would be faithful to his promise beyond anything imaginable. Do you believe this? Really? [D]
 - a. How would believing that help you let go of the things you hold back from God? [D]
 - b. What specific things could you do to cultivate a conviction that God is faithful? [D]
 - c. What specific things might help you prepare for the tests God brings into your life? [P/D]

Praying for Each Other

(Use these suggestions alone or with other prayer requests to help focus your time in prayer together).

- Pray for tests that people are facing now.
- Pray for tests that you are just not sure that you could handle.
- Pray that God might convince you that God is faithful beyond your imagination.