



### **Question: "How did Abraham know that God will provide a lamb (Genesis 22:8)?"**

**Answer:** Abraham knew that God would provide Himself with a lamb because, after years of having an immature faith, Abraham grew to fully trust that what God says He will do, He will do. In Genesis 15:6, after God had promised Abraham to give him innumerable descendants, Abraham believed in God, and it was credited to Abraham as righteousness. Initially, Abraham tried to help God keep His promise by suggesting that Eliezer be counted as his heir (Genesis 15:3) and by taking Hagar as his wife (Genesis 16). God's plan wasn't for either of these scenarios to provide the fulfillment of His promise. Instead, God further specified that Sarah would have a son and his name would be Isaac (Genesis 17:19). Isaac would be the covenant son through whom God would keep His promises (Genesis 17:21).

Just as God had promised, Isaac was born (Genesis 21:1–2). Some years later, God tested Abraham's faith, telling Him to take Isaac to Mount Moriah and sacrifice him to the Lord there (Genesis 22:2). This was a horrifying and grievous request, yet Abraham started off in the morning to do exactly what God had told him to do (Genesis 22:3–6). As they were making the journey, Isaac observes that there is no lamb for the sacrifice, and he asks his father about that oddity (Genesis 22:7). Abraham responded to his son that God will provide Himself a lamb (Genesis 22:8). When they arrived at the right place, Abraham bound his son and was about to take the prescribed action and kill Isaac (Genesis 22:9–10).

The author of Hebrews tells us what Abraham was thinking—how he could be willing to kill his son, and how he could know that God will provide Himself a lamb. When God told Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, Abraham considered that God was able to raise people from the dead (Hebrews 11:19). God had promised Abraham that Isaac would be the covenant son, and that from Isaac God would raise up a mighty nation in fulfillment of the promises God had made to Abraham. God had already miraculously kept His promises—that Isaac was even born was a miracle in itself. Abraham had learned that God is faithful. At first, Abraham simply exercised faith (Genesis 15:6), and God counted that to Abraham as righteousness (as He does with us when we believe in Him). But part of growing in our relationship with God is increasing in confidence that He is able and willing to accomplish what He has said. Because Abraham had seen God's faithfulness, when this uncharacteristic request of human sacrifice was made, Abraham trusted God that He knew what He was doing. Abraham knew that, even despite this strange and awful request, God would provide and God would keep His word.

Before Abraham could bring the knife down to strike his son, the angel or messenger of the Lord called out to Him from heaven acknowledging that Abraham had passed the test and should not kill Isaac (Genesis 22:11–12). Of course, God never intended that Abraham would actually kill Isaac. He simply wanted to show Abraham that, no matter how impossible the circumstances, Abraham could trust God. As Abraham looked up, he saw a ram caught in a thicket nearby and offered the ram as a sacrifice instead of Isaac (Genesis 22:13). Abraham then acknowledged that God had provided for His word to be kept, and he named the place "Jehovah-Jireh," which means "The Lord Will Provide" (Genesis 22:14).

While Abraham's weakness of faith is chronicled in Genesis 18—21, God did not reject him or

punish him for that immaturity. God did, however, provide him opportunities to grow and then puts him to the test so he can demonstrate that growth. Abraham learned that God is faithful, and even when we are unsure of how God is going to keep His word, we can be certain that He is faithful and that He *will* keep His word.

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# Kill Your Son, Abraham: Making Sense of a Shocking Command

By Alex Duke

Some folks really hate the Bible. Atheist Richard Dawkins is among them.

Some folks, though, really love the Bible. And they don't just love *parts* of it, they love every single word. And these folks aren't naifs and Neanderthals who have accidentally survived into the 21st century. They're not malformed or malicious. They're just normal, born-again Christians.

One part of the Bible that normal, born-again Christians really love is a part Dawkins really hates: Genesis 22.

Here's Dawkins's color commentary on the passage:

God ordered Abraham to make a burnt offering of his longed-for son. Abraham built an altar, put firewood upon it, and trussed Isaac up on top of the wood. His murdering knife was already in his hand when an angel dramatically intervened with the news of a last-minute change of plan: God was only joking after all, "tempting" Abraham, and testing his faith. . . . This disgraceful story is an example simultaneously of child abuse, bullying in two asymmetrical power relationships, and the first recorded use of the Nuremberg defense: "I was only obeying orders."

On the surface, what Dawkins says here may *seem* like a reasonable—if a bit jaundiced—reading of the text. After all, I suspect many Christians have silently wondered some version of these questions. So what do we make of Genesis 22? Does Moses show us beauty or bullying? Grace or disgrace? Child abuse—or a blessing being passed down by faith from a loving father to a faithful son?

Upon investigation, it becomes clear that what Dawkins says isn't reasonable. In fact, it's quite wrong.

## Genesis 22 Is a 'Test'

As a quasi-omniscient narrator, Moses frames the events: "After these things God tested Abraham . . ." Importantly, Moses doesn't say that God *punished* Abraham, or that he *tempted* Abraham.

Why does this matter? Well, any discerning reader is going to wonder: *Why is God commanding child sacrifice? That's something Molech would do, not Yahweh.* The question nags at us. Like a

rattle in the engine, we wonder why it's there, and if it tells us something might be terminally wrong with God.

Some might say, "Well, God didn't *actually* command Abraham to kill his son." But this requires some Olympic-level interpretive gymnastics. Abraham did intend to kill Isaac; that much is clear. So how do we untangle the knot of whether God is immoral for commanding an immoral action?

That word "test" is our skeleton key. God commands Abraham to do this as a one-question test: "Abraham, do you trust me?" Previously, Abraham got an "F" on this test. Remember: this is the same guy who lied about his wife twice to protect himself (Gen. 12, 20) and slept with his wife's servant because he doubted God would keep his word (Gen. 16).

God commands Abraham to do this as a one-question test: 'Abraham, do you trust me?'

Of course, God already knows what will happen. Moses might be a quasi-omniscient narrator, but Yahweh is a fully omniscient God. This test isn't filling in a gap in God's understanding. It's filling in a gap in Abraham's faith.

You might be reading this with a furrowed brow. You might think I'm the worst public defender around, and that my defense for the Lord lacks both sense and sensitivity. So your mind is a hung jury. You're still wondering, *How can God do this? This is just . . . wrong.*

If that's you, then perhaps—a bit like Abraham—you doubt God's character. You know who he *says* he is, but your *experience* of him has piled up evidence to the contrary. Your circumstances prosecute the Lord, and sometimes, if you're honest, they make a compelling case.

That's OK. We've all been there. Perhaps Genesis 22 is God's test for you, in which he's asking the same question he asked Abraham: "Do you trust me?"

No doubt, Genesis 22 tests Abraham's mettle. In the request itself, it's as if God is sharpening his, to borrow a phrase from Dawkins, murdering knife: "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love . . . (Gen. 22:2)." With every phrase, sparks fly as the blade gets sharper, as the wound in his heart gets deeper. God's request applies unbelievable pressure to Abraham's weakest point, that gnawing question he's asked himself for years: "Will God really keep his promise to me?"

How would Abraham respond this time? Has he changed? Yes, he has! "So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac" (Gen. 22:3).

## Abraham Expects Isaac to Die . . . and Rise Again

Unless he's intentionally deceiving his servants, which we have no reason to believe, it's clear that Abraham believes Isaac will return with him: "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you" (Gen. 22:5).

And it's clear from the subsequent moments—which Moses narrates detail-by-detail, masterfully building tension—that Abraham *also* believed he would kill his son.

Does Isaac's innocent-yet-haunting question destroy this thesis? With wood strapped to his back, he asks: "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham responds somewhat enigmatically: "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son."

Perhaps Genesis 22 is God's test for you, in which he's asking the same question he asked Abraham: 'Do you trust me?'

We're face-to-face with an interpretive difficulty: Is Abraham's "my son" affectionate or (to use a technical term) appositional? Is he saying, "My son, don't worry—God will provide a lamb" or is he saying, "God will provide a lamb, that is, my son"? I think it's the latter, though it's possible Abraham *originally* meant the former but, as the sand ran out of the hourglass, he slowly realized that though his heart had planned a way, the Lord had determined his steps.

By the time we get to the New Testament, any Genesis 22–related fog fades. Forget Richard Dawkins's color commentary. Here's the author of Hebrews' color commentary on Isaac's miraculous conception. We need to start here:

By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, *and him as good as dead*, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore. (Heb. 11:11–12)

Aha! We've just been some given vital information. But before I tell you what it is, we need to keep reading:

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. (Heb. 11:17–19)

The author of Hebrews gets what Moses is up to in Genesis 22, and so he gets what *God* is up to in Genesis 22. He knows this was a "test" (Heb. 11:17). But how does he know Abraham "considered that God was able even to raise [Isaac] from the dead"?

Two reasons: first, because *that's what happened in the moment*, at least figuratively (Heb. 11:19). Abraham's slaughtering knife hung ominously over Isaac's neck (Gen. 22:10). But then he heard not a rattle in the engine, but a rustling in the thicket (Gen. 22:13). Isaac was as good as dead, until God intervened. What mercy!

But there's a second and, I think, more essential reason that Abraham believed Isaac would be raised. Because Abraham's *life* had been defined by resurrection—and perhaps en route to Mount Moriah, he finally realized it. Perhaps, upon hearing the Lord's strange request, Abraham's life flashed before his eyes and he finally came to the right conclusion: *God can do anything, and so I trust him*.

Perhaps he remembered that even though he and his wife “were old [and] advanced in years” and “the way of women had ceased to be with Sarah” (Gen. 18:11; Heb. 11:11), God promised to give him a son. Perhaps he remembered Sarah's laugh when she heard the promise, and her droll response: “After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?” (Gen. 18:12). Perhaps he even remembered the gentle rebuke: “Is anything too hard for the LORD?” (Gen. 18:14). Perhaps he looked back on his life and, for the first time, saw what had always been there: resurrection, resurrection, resurrection.

Abraham's life was a Rolodex of resurrection.

Abraham's life was a Rolodex of resurrection. From the moment God called him out of Ur, God had demonstrated his resurrection power over and over again. *That's* why the author of Hebrews can say Abraham—just like Isaac and Sarah—was “as good as dead” (Heb. 11:12). He had no son, yet from him “were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore” (Heb. 11:12; cf. Gen. 22:17). What mercy!

In short, Abraham believed Isaac would die and rise again because Abraham knew that he himself had *already* died and rose again. He and Sarah had a son! Is one resurrection too hard for the Lord? Of course not. So why not another one?

## **What Do You See?**

When you read Genesis 22, what do you see? Hopefully what Abraham saw—that nothing is too hard for the Lord.

All of this, of course, is like a neon sign pointing to the death of the Father's only begotten Son, Jesus, whom he loved. The connections are so obvious as to be almost allegorical: there's a loving father; there's an obedient son walking toward his death; there's wood strapped across his back; there's a substitutionary ram.

But perhaps more predictive than those details is Genesis 22's location: Mount Moriah, the future site of the temple (2 Chron. 3:1). This means the averted sacrifice of Isaac became institutionalized for the people of God throughout the generations. As they sacrificed in the

temple over and over again, Abraham's history and experience became theirs. They offered sacrifices and praised God for his continual, over-and-over-again provision.

Jesus's death ended all this; his blood decimated any need for a repetitive sacrificial system (Heb. 9:11). There's no need for the sacrifice of Isaac to be institutionalized for us because the institution has crumbled—and in its place, there's Jesus.

The institution [of the temple] has now crumbled—and in its place, there's Jesus.

So we don't *do* anything to re-experience salvation. We simply believe and believe, over and over again—and, like Abraham, our faith is counted to us as righteousness (Gen. 15:6; Gal. 3:6). And like Isaac, we prove ourselves to be "sons of Abraham." This is why Paul told one church who seemed obsessed with impressing God by their works:

Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. . . . Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith. (Gal. 3:6–7, 13–14)

So, I'll ask again: when you read Genesis 22, what do you see? Hopefully, you see a story of a father's love for his son, a son's trust in his father, and a promised blessing being passed down by faith from one generation to the next—until it got to you. What mercy.

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## Question: "Why did God command Abraham to sacrifice Isaac?"

**Answer:** Abraham had obeyed God many times in his walk with Him, but no test could have been more severe than the one in Genesis 22. God commanded, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you" (Genesis 22:2).

This was an astounding command because Isaac was the son of promise. God had promised several times that from Abraham's own body would come a nation as multitudinous as the stars in heaven (Genesis 12:2–3; 15:4–5). Later, Abraham was specifically told that the promise would be through Isaac (Genesis 21:12).

Given that God's testing of Abraham involved a command to do something He elsewhere forbids (see Jeremiah 7:31), we must ask, "Why did God command Abraham to sacrifice Isaac?" The Bible does not specifically address the answer to this question, but in our study of Scripture we can compile a few reasons:

*God's command to sacrifice Isaac was to test Abraham's faith.* God's tests prove and purify our faith. They cause us to seek Him and trust Him more. God's test of Abraham allowed His child—and all the world—to see the reality of faith in action. Faith is more than an inner spiritual attitude; faith *works* (see James 2:18).

*God's command to sacrifice Isaac was to validate Abraham as the "father" of all who have faith in God.* "Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness" (Romans 4:9). And we today "who have the faith of Abraham" also find that "he is the father of us all" (verse 16). Without Abraham's response to the command to sacrifice Isaac, we would have difficulty knowing all that faith entails. God uses Abraham's faith as an example of the type of faith required for salvation.

*God's command to sacrifice Isaac was to provide an example of absolute obedience.* After God gave the command, "early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey" and headed out with his son and the wood for a burnt offering (Genesis 22:3). There was no delay, no questioning, no arguing. Just simple obedience, which brought a blessing (verses 15–18).

*God's command to sacrifice Isaac was to reveal God as Jehovah-Jireh.* On the way up the mountain to the place of sacrifice, Isaac inquired as to the animal to be sacrificed, and his father said, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son" (Genesis 22:8). After God's provision of a ram to take Isaac's place on the altar, "Abraham called that place The Lord Will Provide" (verse 14). Thus we have another character-revealing name of God: *Yahweh-Yireh*.

*God's command to sacrifice Isaac was to foreshadow God's sacrifice of His own Son.* The story of Abraham prefigures the New Testament teaching of the atonement, the sacrificial offering of the Lord Jesus on the cross for the sin of mankind. Here are some of the parallels between the sacrifice of Isaac and the sacrifice of Christ:

- "Take your son, your only son, whom you love" (Genesis 22:2); "For God so loved the world that

he gave his one and only Son" (John 3:16).

- "Go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there" (Genesis 22:2); it is believed that this same area is where the city of Jerusalem was built many years later. Jesus was crucified in the same area that Isaac had been laid on the altar.
- "Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering" (Genesis 22:2); "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3).
- "Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac" (Genesis 22:6); Jesus, "carrying his own cross," walked to Calvary (John 19:17).
- "But where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" (Genesis 22:7); John said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).
- "God himself will provide the lamb" (Genesis 22:8); Jesus is likened to a spotless lamb in 1 Peter 1:18–19 and a slain lamb in Revelation 5:6.
- Isaac, who was likely a young man at the time of his sacrifice, acted in obedience to his father (Genesis 22:9); before His sacrifice, Jesus prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39).
- Isaac was resurrected figuratively, and Jesus in reality: "Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death" (Hebrews 11:19); Jesus "was buried, and . . . was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:4).

Many centuries after God's command for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, Jesus said, "Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56). This is a reference to Abraham's joy in seeing the ram caught in the thicket in Genesis 22. That ram was the substitute that would save Isaac's life. Seeing that ram was, in essence, seeing the day of Christ, the Substitute for all of us.

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