

**June 27, 2021****‘Abraham’s Test’**Genesis 22:1-18Romans 9:1-9

‘These uncertain times’ is a phrase we have often heard – and probably often used – over the past 18 months. It does beg the question, of course, as to what we might call ‘certain times’, but it can’t really be denied – these times, not just for us, but for the whole planet, appear to be especially uncertain – and as we’re seeing yet again, it is clearly not over yet! Even here in Australia, territorially so far removed and isolated from so much of the rest of the planet, the pandemic continues to so deeply effect our daily patterns, that it is hard to even think about planning for anything much beyond today, because tomorrow it could all change again!

We could also refer to them as ‘testing times’; it feels like each day is another test – of patience, of good-will, of the ability to keep calm and confident, of maintaining hope for the future for ourselves and our families – and for people who believe in a God who we know is both all-powerful and all-loving, a test of faith, as we hold on to the truth of which we are convinced, but of which we see such little evidence on the broad scale of global and national political and health-related concerns and responses.

What are we to think? How are we to proceed? How do we look forward when everything is so dark, so unclear and uncertain? Where is our focus, our expectation, our hope?

I reckon a few thoughts like these may well have crossed Abraham’s mind, as he trudged his weary way towards the region of Moriah, physically burdened with a pile of firewood, but so much more emotionally burdened with what must have felt like the weight of the world bearing him down.

We’ve jumped another few years in the story – ‘*Some time later,*’ (v.1) is all we are told – but we could safely assume that Isaac was by now a young teenager (note that Ishmael was still called ‘a boy’ and clearly treated as one in the previous chapter, though he must have been at least

15 or 16 years old) – Isaac was certainly old enough and strong enough to carry the wood himself for the final stage of the journey (v.6). God had given Abraham a strange and very disconcerting mission –

“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.” (v.2).

It was a three-day hike from Beersheba to Moriah – plenty of time for Abraham to think about the implications of this new instruction, and what it could mean to all the dreams and expectations he and Sarah had shared. It was now around 40 years since he had received the initial promise and call from God himself – the beginning of this ‘relationship’ based on the promise of land, people and blessing – with all the ups and downs of that relationship, and all the things he and Sarah had learnt about themselves and God over those years. It had taken 25 years for God to finally fulfil his promise with the miraculous birth of Isaac, at a time when, practically and physically speaking, it was no longer possible for Sarah to give birth. At that time, God had once again affirmed that his promise would be fulfilled through this son – *‘It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.’* (21:12) – and now that it is all getting closer to the possibility of the next stage of fulfilment, God’s clear command is, *‘Sacrifice him.’* Really?

It might help us to understand this a little better from Abraham’s perspective, especially as it seems so foreign, so harsh, so incredibly beyond anything we could imagine in our experience as parents or family members in our context today. Sacrifice your child? Preposterous, totally uncalled for and, whichever way you look at it, so completely wrong. But probably not so in Abraham’s time.

Listen to this instruction from Moses in Deuteronomy 18.

‘When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. Let no one be found among you who sacrifices their son or daughter in the fire, or who practices [a whole bunch of other things]. ... Because of these same detestable practices the Lord your God will drive out those nations before you.’ (Deut 18:9-12).

Yes, this is several hundred years later, but it is a description of the land where Abraham was living, and of the practices of the nations that already belonged there – and child sacrifice, it seems, could have been considered ‘normal practice’. So this instruction from God would have appeared to be consistent with the religious practice of the nations amongst whom he was living. While it seems inhuman and abhorrent to us, and while it would have also been deeply disturbing and inconsistent with all expectations for Abraham, it may not have appeared unusual.

On the other hand, the text doesn’t make it clear but I assume he didn’t tell Sarah the whole story about the trip he was going on with their son. If he had, it might have meant at least another chapter or two of Genesis to allow for Sarah’s expressions of anger, opposition, fear and love in defence of her son – so the question of how he would explain all this to her on his return would have also no doubt have featured in his meditations.

And then, of course, there were Abraham’s own feelings to consider. God himself had said it – *‘your son, your only son, whom you love’* (v.2) – Abraham is not devoid of normal human emotion. His first-born son, Ishmael, had long gone, sent packing years earlier, and probably not seen or heard of since – no swapping of email addresses or sharing a Facebook connection for continuing contact while travelling in those days. All the hopes and dreams, all the expectations and possibilities, all the promises of God from all of the past 40 years – all of it was bound up in this ‘son whom he loves’ – and now he was on his way to sacrifice, or more starkly, to cold-bloodedly kill him.

And to make it even worse, as the two of them make the final ascent up the mountain, Isaac asks his father the impossible question, *‘Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?’* (v.7). Can you even begin to imagine how hard it would have been for Abraham to calmly reply, *“God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.”* (v.8)? I’d have been choking back tears of despair, of rage, of uncertainty – feeling trapped and desperate and completely unable to face the final and brutal decision which had to be made – follow my heart, or obey my God – which would it be?

For Abraham, these three days of hiking and camping with his son would have been an extraordinarily testing time! And now, coming to the final moments, how could he possibly get out of this mess?

Well, you know the narrative – you’ve heard the story before and you know how it ends. Abraham and Isaac built the altar and placed the wood on it. Then Abraham bound Isaac and laid him on top, taking a knife in his hand to slay his son. As he paused, ready to commit the ultimate violation of all he could imagine, an angelic voice filled the space –

‘Abraham! Abraham!’ ‘Here I am,’ he replied. ‘Do not lay a hand on the boy’ he said. ‘Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.’ (vs 11-12).

They found a ram caught in a thicket, which they were able to sacrifice instead of Isaac, naming the place *‘The Lord Will Provide’* (v.14) to remind everyone *‘to this day’* of God’s gracious provision in a time of such critical testing.

Two very quick notes in passing.

First, the name ‘Moriah’ provides for an interesting reflection. It occurs only twice in the Old Testament – once here in Genesis 22, where it describes a mountainous region three days walk from Beersheba, and again in 2 Chronicles 3, where we read,

‘Solomon began to build the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah ... it was on the threshing floor of Arauna the Jebusite, the place provided by David.’ (v.1).

It is only supposition, but (as it happens) Jerusalem could be regarded as close to three days walk from Beersheba – and if these two references actually are talking about the same place, there is an extraordinary link between the would-be sacrifice of Abraham’s son, and the future sacrifice of another ‘Son’ which would be even more significant than this one!

Second, three times in this short account, the voice of God, speaking to Abraham, refers to Isaac as *‘your son, your only son’* (vs 2, 12, 16), and

on one of those occasions the ‘voice’ adds ‘*whom you love*’ (v.2). It immediately draws our thoughts to perhaps even more familiar words from the New Testament, where a similar ‘*voice from heaven*’ declares,

“This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”
(Matt 3:17).

It is, of course, at Jesus’ baptism, but the connection is inescapable – both are sons of promise, both births are brought about only by God’s power, both are critical to the covenant God was making with his people, and both sons stand at the centre of God’s purpose and represent the assurance of all that God has promised for his people.

We must take heart from this. These are not random connections, but they speak of God fulfilling his promise, providing hope and salvation for his people – not just in Abraham’s experience, but also in ours. These events speak clearly into the situation in which we find ourselves today.

As Glenys and I have returned to Kiama for these few weeks of reconnection and ministry at KAC, we have been struck by the conversations we have encountered regarding the hard times experienced by many. We are, of course, very aware of how difficult things have been for the KAC community over the past 6-8 months, and as we come back to church, we see some of the fall-out from all that has happened. Other churches have also had their struggles – we note that Generocity Church has lost their pastor, and in recent weeks, the Presbyterian minister has suddenly resigned. There have been problems at Probus; Kiama High School has suffered a number of suicides of present or past students; we mourn the untimely death of a friend from the Bowlo; our local state MP, who identifies as a Christian, has had to stand down from his office because of charges against him (which he denies). It seems to Glenys and me that Kiama (and maybe the wider region) is caught in some kind of ‘oppression’ or spiritual warfare that appears to be rife in our community – and on top of all that sits COVID – today again rearing its ugly head in a manner which so deeply affects our activities and normalities as individuals and as a church. Tell me this is NOT spiritual warfare of some kind!

These are testing times – and this account of Abraham’s ‘test’ helps us to reflect on how we are called to stand in the time of our own testing. Against all that seems reasonable and in the face of increasingly threatening and hostile conditions, we are called to trust God, to place our faith unswervingly in him, to stand firm as his people and to continue to act in faith and obedience to his direction for our church and our lives. We must continue to minister the gospel of Jesus to others in love and grace, in mercy and forgiveness, in acceptance and inclusion, working for justice and hope within our church and community – so we (or they) will call this place ‘The Lord Will Provide’.

What happened at the end of Abraham’s test? God’s promise of people, land and blessing is graciously affirmed, yet again.

‘I will ... make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore [people]. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies [land], and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed [blessing].’ (vs 17-18).

We too must remain steadfast and strong, with our spiritual eyes constantly turned towards Jesus, seeking to be transformed and renewed by his Spirit. Paul said (Ephesians 6),

‘For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that ... you may be able to stand your ground. ... And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.’

Next Sunday (in whatever manner we are allowed to) we are planning to focus on prayer – may this be our first deliberate step in following our forefather Abraham in faith and obedience, that we too will rise to the challenge, and experience for ourselves the truth that ‘The Lord Will Provide.’

Genesis 22:1-18

22 *Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!”*
“Here I am,” he replied.

² *Then God said, “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.”*

³ *Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. ⁴ On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. ⁵ He said to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.”*

⁶ *Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, ⁷ Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, “Father?”*

“Yes, my son?” Abraham replied.

“The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”

⁸ *Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went on together.*

⁹ *When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, “Abraham! Abraham!”*

“Here I am,” he replied.

¹² *“Do not lay a hand on the boy,” he said. “Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”*

¹³ Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴ So Abraham called that place The Lord Will Provide. And to this day it is said, “On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided.”

¹⁵ The angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven a second time ¹⁶ and said, “I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, ¹⁸ and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.”

© Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by International Bible Society
All rights reserved worldwide