

Genesis 22:1-19; October 24, 2010

On Memorial Day weekend, 1989, the Harrison Ford movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* hit American theaters with popular anticipation and high critical praise. The film immediately set two box-office records: it collected the most receipts ever in one day (\$10 million), and had the biggest opening week in film history (grossing \$50 million). In France, no other movie had ever sold more than a million tickets, but *The Last Crusade* sold over 6 million. And worldwide, in that year alone, the film profited nearly \$500 million.

Now whether you are a movie aficionado or not, those are amazing figures. What I remember most about the film is not the on-screen chemistry between Harrison Ford and Sean Connery, who played Indy's father Henry. I don't remember any of the action scenes or Indy's encounters with scoundrels and disgusting creatures. The one scene that has been etched in my mind for the past 20 years came near the end of the film, and is known as the "Leap of Faith" scene.

Indy and his Nazi foes have met up in a cave that they are certain hides Christ's holy grail somewhere. Indy has a book with clues that lead him through various perils to a cliff. From his side of the ravine he can see a room where the Grail must be. Indy says, "This is impossible. There's no way anyone can get across here." He looks at his clue book, which says that the man of faith must step forth to prove his worth. So he takes a deep breath, summons his courage, and takes a step forward off the cliff, to what seems to be certain death. Instead, to his amazement his foot lands on a narrow stone bridge that has miraculously appeared. He took the step to show his faith, and the bridge carried him to find Christ's chalice.

Time and again in Genesis, Abraham shows himself to be a man of faith, one who steps forth to prove his worth. Our sermon passage today is one of the most crucial and powerful portions of this book. It is packed with human drama and suspense, but it is packed even more with faith expressed in obedient action. And above all, it overflows with even more evidence of God's majesty and mercy.

Genesis 22:1-19: ¹ 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, Isaac, whom

you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about."

³ Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled 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, 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, 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." Then Abraham returned

to his servants, and they set off together for Beersheba. And Abraham stayed in Beersheba. *This is the Word of the Lord*

If there were ever a time when we could easily understand Abraham questioning God, this could be it. Many years before, God commanded Abraham to leave his homeland and his extended family to go to a place God would show him later on. God also asked Abraham to trust that one day he would have a son, and through that son God would make his descendants as numerous as the stars. Year, after year, after year passed, and nothing. When it may have seemed that God had forgotten His promise to Abraham and Sarah, God appeared and spoke to Abraham. The Lord made a solemn covenant to assure Abraham that despite how hopeless things may look, God always keeps His Word.

Finally, after many years, Isaac is born. This long-awaited child carried in his blood the hopes and dreams not only of his parents, but of an entire race of people who had yet to be born. He grew up healthy and strong. And then, it happened. God again came to Abraham, we are told, to test his faith. In reality, Isaac doesn't belong to Abraham, but to God. The Lord gives, and the Lord can take away. We could argue that Isaac was the most precious blessing God had ever given to Abraham. Did Abraham trust the Lord enough to obey, and return that gift? Did Abraham love the Lord more than he loved Isaac, and more than he loved all of the hopes and dreams that centered upon Isaac's life? Was Abraham willing and able to take his faith, and put it into action?

Now we all know how the story ends, but some of the anxiety we sense between the lines has to do with a nagging, perhaps even troubling, question. Why would a holy, loving God, who clearly prohibits murder and child sacrifice in the rest of Scripture, ask Abraham to do such a terrible act? At this time in history, child sacrifice to fertility gods was a very common practice, but it still doesn't make sense. God has asked Abraham not to be like those pagans, but to trust and worship Him alone. So, what gives?

First of all, the Scriptures show us that the Lord often tests His followers. He doesn't set us up for failure, but He desires to stretch us, and help us to grow. When we fail the tests, He forgives, and urges us to try again. Sometimes our growth in faith is like learning how to ride a bike. We learn little by little by practice, when we still have the training wheels on. Eventually, our father sees that we need to grow a little more, so the

training wheels come off. We wobble, and sometimes crash. But the Father is there to pick us up, put a Band-Aid on our scrapes, and put us back on the bike when we're ready. Gradually we learn our balance, and how to brake and pedal. And soon enough, riding comes naturally. We may crash now and then, but the Father is there to help us see what went wrong, and encourage us to try again.

Though we may not like to face it, trials and testing are an important and natural part of spiritual growth, just as we need tests in school to show where we've grown, and where we need to improve. The Holy Spirit is always about the work of nourishing us toward growth and maturity. Sometimes we may face a test because the Lord wants us to succeed and be encouraged by seeing how we have progressed in faith. An athlete does not grow faster and stronger without stretching and testing her muscles, and competing against other athletes. When she wins, she can be pleased and grateful for having abilities that are maturing. When she loses, she can learn from the race and come back stronger next time.

Another thing we can note here is that the Lord often tests us by having us decide what our priorities need to be. God knew how hard this test would be for Abraham, because there clearly was deep love between father and son. God wasn't just asking Abraham to obey. He was asking him how much he was willing to sacrifice for the Lord's sake. "Abraham, do you love me enough to give back to me the son you waited until you were elderly to see?" When the Lord tells Abraham to offer Isaac as a burnt sacrifice, there is a definite implication: there is to be nothing left but ashes. The Lord wanted this sacrifice to be 100% complete. The Lord wants all of our hearts, not just parts that we choose.

So that takes us back to my question. Why does a holy, loving God ask Abraham to slay his own son? Notice that Abraham doesn't ask this question. Abraham knew the Lord well enough to believe that the Lord's ways are not our ways. Abraham knew from past experience that the Lord always gave him all he needed. Maybe Abraham would have like a clearer explanation, but he doesn't ask for it because he trusts that God knows what He's doing. God's wisdom is infinite, and He isn't obligated to explain Himself to us. Abraham knew that God is wise, and God is good, and God would not ask something of him that would contradict His holiness and lovingkindness.

Verse 3 tells us that Abraham leaves his home with the clear intention to obey. He even cuts the firewood ahead of time. We aren't told what went through Abraham's mind as he spent those three days traveling with Isaac and the servants. But we are told some very crucial words that Abraham speaks to the servants, and then to Isaac, when they reach their destination at Moriah. First, in verse 5 he says, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. **We** will worship, and then **we** will come back to you." And then when Isaac pieces together the fact that the sacrificial animal is missing, Abraham speaks the classic words, "God Himself will provide the lamb, my son." Though Abraham was willing to do exactly as the Lord asked by offering Isaac as a sacrifice, He also knew His Lord's character. The Lord's promises cannot be thwarted, no matter how impossible the situation seems. God had promised that through Isaac, Abraham would be the father of many, and somehow, someday, God would see that promise through.

As much as we should consider the faith of Abraham, Isaac's trust and faith in the Lord, and in his own father, should also be commended. Imagine that your father takes you, binds you like an animal, and lays you on top of a pile of wood. He is holding a butchering knife in his hand, and there is no animal sacrifice around. Abraham even gets to the point where he has drawn the knife to slay Isaac before the angel of the Lord stops him. Through all of this, Isaac seems amazingly compliant. With all of the detail in this story, we would likely be told if Isaac resisted his father, or questioned, or cried out. Today there would be criminal charges against Abraham; Isaac would be placed in foster care and given psychological evaluations for being so submissive.

But Isaac is submissive to his father, and in this case, that is wonderful. Why? Because he is behaving just like his father Abraham, who is submissive to His Heavenly Father. Abraham is so faithful and obedient that he trusts the Lord to provide a lamb, even up to the last moment with the blade in his hand. Of course, Abraham wasn't disappointed. God did provide a lamb. And to top it all off, the Lord repeats the blessings He has given to Abraham before. God confirms that not only is Abraham a man of faith, but he is willing to put that faith on the line, and take action.

This is the point that our earlier reading from James 2 makes. It simply is not enough to say, "I have faith." It's not enough to say, "I'm a Christian." People who are

truly disciples of our Lord Jesus will show concrete evidence of faith in their lives. They will demonstrate the fruits of the Holy Spirit on a consistent basis. From James 2 we understand that faith isn't just a claim. It's not just head knowledge. It's not even about who goes to church, or who puts the most in the collection plate. It's really about character. A person who has truly received the gift of faith from God will display the character of God, and will grow in that faith so all can see the light of the Lord through their lives.

One illustration of the relationship between faith and deeds that I like comes from William Booth, who founded the Salvation Army. He says, "Faith and works should travel side by side, step answering to step, like the legs of men walking. First faith, and then works; and then faith again, and then works again -- until they can scarcely distinguish which is the one and which is the other." What I would add to his thought is that when faith and deeds are sincere in the heart of a believer, they come as naturally as walking, or riding a bike. All of us learned how to walk a long time ago, and we don't need to think about how to do it. Sometimes we trip or stumble, just as we do in our Christian walk. For a believer, obeying and putting our gift of faith into action becomes more and more our joyful habit, and we more and more come to resemble our Lord Jesus.

Is there an area of your life right now where the Lord is stretching and testing you? And maybe you're having spiritual growing pains? Whenever God tests us, He's really asking you and me the same question He asked Abraham. How much are you willing to sacrifice for my sake? If there is a cost you'll have to pay in order to obey me, how much are you willing to stake? Your reputation? Your livelihood? The Lord Jesus asked the rich young ruler to sell everything he had and give it to the poor. The young man went away sad, because he wasn't willing to give up his riches to follow Jesus. Are there things that you would struggle to do, or to give up, if the Lord asked you to?

This story teaches us that the Lord isn't content for us to simply avoid sin, though of course that's crucial. Our Heavenly Father wants us to choose Him. He wants us to be loyal to Him above everything, and everyone else, in the entire world. He wants our complete attention and devotion, not only because He deserves it as

God, but because only when we give Him our complete devotion do we grow and blossom.

You know as well as I do that sometimes our tests are deeply painful. When we face trials that seem too much to bear, we can trust the promise of God in 1 Corinthians that He will never test us beyond what we can bear. James 1 promises us that the testing of our faith leads to perseverance. 1 Peter 1 teaches that our trials come so that our faith, which is of greater worth than gold, may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor to Jesus.

Perhaps the greatest truth we have to rely upon when we face trials is that God is sovereign over everything. Romans 8 touches on this when it says, that “in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” Abraham and Isaac weren’t just lucky that there happened to be a ram caught in the thicket nearby. There’s no such thing as luck, or karma. As Abraham said, the Lord provided the lamb as a substitute for the sacrifice of Isaac. The entire scene allowed Abraham to show his faith put into action. But more importantly, through this event God showed His power, mercy, and love for Abraham, and for those who would become the Israelites. It is not an accident that the word “provide” is part of our word “providence.” Through His sovereign goodness, our Heavenly Father gives us our daily bread, and everything else we need as His beloved children.

Like Abraham, we can give our full trust to the Lord because He is good and holy, and always keeps His Word. The Father was willing to sacrifice His one and only Son, the Lamb of God, for our sake. Romans 8 states, “If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all -- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” No matter what trial or test you face today, or tomorrow, you can be confident that through Jesus Christ, we are more than conquerors over sin, death, and any hardship. The Lord has promised that nothing can ever separate you and me from His love, and praise God, He always keeps His Word.

Let us pray.