

**+ Genesis 22:1-18 + The Foolishness of the Cross: The Cross Means Giving Up +
+ 1st Sunday in Lent + 14 February 2016 +**

What would you be willing to give up for the Lord? During the church season of Lent, you often hear how people try to “give up” something for the 40 days before Easter. Maybe it’s a bad habit—smoking, drinking, eating too much. Maybe it’s something you enjoy—sweets, meat, Facebook. Yet why do people do that? Why “give up” something during Lent?

For some, it’s a genuine desire as believers to better focus their hearts and minds on the study of God’s Word and prayer. That “fast” enables them to focus more on preparation and repentance and Christ. Yet for many, it’s just habit. They’ve been giving up something for Lent all their lives as have their family and friends because that’s just what you do during Lent. You don’t eat meat on Fridays, but you can eat fish. While Lent is a church season of preparation and even fasting, unfortunately “giving up” something for Lent has also become something of an attempt to gain points with God or to earn a badge of honor for your so-called “sacrifice.”

Yet is that what God wants from you and me? Does he care that much that you cut sweets or red meat out of your diet for 40 days or that you use social media less? Or does God want you to focus on a different kind of “giving up”—a “giving up” that starts with his own great sacrifice for us and leads to our willingness to “give up” for him what we hold most dear?

To help us understand that better, we travel back about 2,000 years before Christ to the time of a believer named Abraham and his son Isaac. When Abraham was 75, the Lord had called him to take his wife Sarah and all he owned to Canaan—a rich land located where modern Israel is today. The Lord also gave Abraham a promise—the promise of a son through whose Descendant **“all peoples on earth will be blessed.”** (Genesis 12:3b)

There was one problem. Abraham was 75 years old. Sarah was 65, and they had no children. Their prospects of having any children were slim to none, but as the years passed, the Lord kept reminding Abraham that they would have a son whose family would become a nation and through whom the Savior would come. By faith Abraham trusted that God had the power to do what he had promised, but they still had to wait.

In fact, 25 years would pass before God would fulfill his promise. Abraham and Sarah laughed with joy at God’s gracious fulfillment against impossible odds. Abraham was 100 and Sarah was 90 years old when she gave birth to their only son Isaac. From a parent’s perspective, after so much waiting, you could understand if Abraham loved his son more than anything or anyone else. You could understand if Isaac became Abraham’s top priority.

Before long Isaac was a healthy, young man. His parents loved him dearly. About that time we’re told **“God tested Abraham.”** God wasn’t being mean or sadistic. No, the Lord tested Abraham’s love and trust in the true God. Was it genuine? Did he only trust because God had promised a son? Had that son taken first place in Abraham’s life—even over the Lord himself?

Nevertheless, God’s request makes us scratch our heads. **“Abraham!” “Here I am,”** he replied. **“Take your son, your only son, the one whom you love dearly—Isaac...”** “Yes?”, Abraham thought. God was piling up the terms about his son—his only son, the child whom he loved dearly, but why?

“Take your son...and go to the region of Moriah in southern Canaan. **Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.”** “Sacrifice Isaac? Sacrifice my son like a lamb or goat? My son—a burnt offering?” Surely questions raced through Abraham’s mind. Surely there was some confusion as to why God would make such a strange request, but Abraham didn’t talk back or try to argue with God. Instead he acted without hesitation.

Abraham got up early the next morning and started packing. He got all the necessary provisions. Then he **“saddled his donkey”** and **“took...two of his servants and his son Isaac.”** They stopped along the way so he could **“cut enough wood for the burnt offering...”** Abraham deliberately did what he would normally do to prepare for a burnt offering—a sacrifice to the Lord. Yet each action must have been agonizing—packing and saddling and cutting wood. Then they **“set out for the place God had told him about.”** Every step brought them closer to the moment of sacrifice.

After three days of traveling, Abraham finally saw the mountain in the distance. So he told 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.” Funny that Abraham would say that. We look at Abraham’s comment and wonder why. Our only honest answer is that he trusted God.

Leaving the servants and donkey behind, Abraham took the wood of the sacrifice and placed it on his son’s shoulders. Isaac was big enough and strong enough to carry a load of wood up a mountain. Abraham **“carried the fire and the knife”**, but it was Isaac’s next comment that cut Abraham.

“Father?” “Yes, my son?” “The fire and the wood are here...but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” Was Abraham trying to distract his son with wishful hope? **“...The two of them went on together.”**

They climbed the mountain and when they got to **“the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there...”** out of rocks. He then carefully arranged the wood so it would provide a consuming fire. Then **“he bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.”** Considering that Abraham had not revealed to Isaac what God had commanded him, you would expect the young man’s “fight or flight” instinct to kick in. Here you have a young, healthy teen and an elderly man of about 110. At the very least Isaac could’ve resisted and run away to safety...but he didn’t. He willingly and quietly allowed himself to be prepared for sacrifice. The moment had come.

With tears in his eyes Abraham lifted the knife **“to slay his son.”** In another moment his son would be dead, but God had commanded this. Just as the knife was about to come slicing down, **“the...LORD called out to him from heaven, ‘Abraham! Abraham!’” “Here I am,”** he replied staring at his bound son on the altar with the sacrificial knife in his hand. **“Do not lay a hand on the boy...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.”**

Abraham would not have to slay his son. In fact, at that moment, Abraham looked up from his son to see **“there in a thicket...a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering in place of his son.”** The Lord of grace had provided a substitute to be sacrificed for Abraham’s beloved son. **“So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide”—literally “The LORD will be seen.”** The Lord in his grace had allowed himself to be seen as he provided that substitute sacrifice for Isaac.

So how could Abraham so willingly obey the Lord’s command and offer up his son for sacrifice? How was Abraham able to “give up” his son to the Lord? The writer of the book of Hebrews (11:17-19) explains, **“By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, ‘It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.’ Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.”**

Abraham willingly obeyed the Lord because he trusted that God had the power to keep his promises, even if it meant raising Isaac back from the dead. Figuratively speaking, that’s exactly what the Lord did—and the Lord in his grace richly blessed Abraham and his family. **“I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore...And through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.”**

Now you might say, “I could never do what Abraham did.” That’s true. God doesn’t typically ask parents to make that kind of sacrifice. After all, Abraham did have the promise of the Savior through his son Isaac, and as you look at this account you can see shadows and types of what would come through Isaac’s descendant Jesus. Most notably, you see how the Lord “gave up” a substitute to be sacrificed in place of Abraham’s beloved son.

Yet what would you be willing to give up for the Lord? Or are there things in your life that you hold so precious, so dear that unlike Abraham you hesitate to give them up for the sake of God and his Word? When God has required you to give up something—some time, some friend, some money, some popularity, out of love and loyalty to Christ and his Word, did you do it? Did you do it gladly and willingly without complaint? If God would ask you now to give up house and home, wealth and position, all that you are and have, would you get up early and do it without hesitation? If you and I do not love God enough to give up what is most precious to us for him, why should he give up what is most precious to him for us? Why give up his Son for us? It would be foolish!

Yet that’s exactly what he did. That’s what God promised to Abraham. The offspring, descended from Isaac, did bring blessing to all nations because he came to be the substitute sacrifice in your place and mine. You

and I prefer to hold on to what or who is most precious to us in this life, yet the Lord **“who is seen,”** the Lord **“who provides”** knows what’s best and “gives up” his Son, his only Son, his beloved Son to purify us from all sin.

That “giving up” of his Son can seem so foolish to us—just as giving up what is most precious to us for the sake of following Christ might seem foolish. Yet because that Heir of Isaac was given up for us—and did not give up in the battle for our souls, but instead gave up his own life our eternal good, that foolishness proves to be wisdom beyond our own.

Christ Jesus, who was given up for us, now enables us to give up what is most precious out of love and loyalty to him and his Word. He, who has given all for us, deserves our all for him—and that may mean sacrificing what or who is most precious to you. Yet if the Lord requires that of you, know this. The Lord of free and faithful grace gladly and willingly gave up his Son first that might be his beloved child forever. With that beautiful wisdom of God before our eyes, may he then enable each of us to give our all for him! Amen.