

Grace and Peace be to you from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord.

God tells Abraham to kill his only son, and he is willing to go through with it. Somehow this is a picture of faith. But if this is what faith is, do you really want it?

We might console ourselves with the thought that everything turned out all right. God really didn't make Abraham go through with it. Instead, he provided a ram for the sacrifice, which makes us think forward in time to the sacrifice of Christ, where God really did offer up his only Son.

But how could God even ask this of Abraham in the first place? The question becomes more pointed when you realize that this is not just an example of faith in the Bible; it is *the* example of faith in the Bible. When Paul wants to provide the definitive example of justification in Romans 4, he turns to the story of Abraham, where God promises Abraham that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky, and "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." Abraham believed God's promise, and God considered Abraham's faith to be righteousness.

Following St. Paul, Lutherans call this "justification." We hold that we are justified by faith alone. The fact that Abraham actually did offer his son is then cited as proof of his faith by James and Hebrews. So, we cannot get around this text. This incident is at the very heart of the Lutheran understanding of salvation.

To make matters worse, God is not just asking Abraham to kill his son but to kill the one through whom all nations would be blessed and through whom his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. So, the command to sacrifice Isaac is not only a catastrophic event in Abraham's family, but it also has the potential to be catastrophic for the whole world. God's test contradicts not only Abraham's natural affection for his son but also God's own promise! Jesus was going to be born from Isaac's line, so God is telling Abraham to wipe out all hope for humanity. It's as if God had commanded Mary to smother Jesus in his crib.

And how does Abraham react? What does he feel? The astonishing thing about the text is that it doesn't tell us. Abraham is silent. He does not tell Sarah what he is planning. He does not tell Isaac what he is about to do. He does not tell the two servants. He says nothing to anyone about what is going on. How does he feel about destroying his family, destroying his marriage, and destroying the one hope for the human race? He doesn't say.

Perhaps Abraham hates God for putting him through this. Why would God mock him by giving him a promise and then taking it away like this? Perhaps what he wanted to do was tell God, "No! You can't have my son. Take me instead! And plunge the knife into his own chest." That would show God what a monstrous command this is! But whatever bitterness may have been roiling in Abraham's heart did not win the day. The promise turned out to be stronger than the bitterness.

Perhaps Abraham was filled with resignation. Perhaps he thought he would go through with it and then return to Sarah as a broken man. At the age of 100, he was young enough to want to be a father, but he will be one no more. Once he has done this, he will resign himself to losing his son and his fatherhood. He will give up hope. But the promise turned out to be stronger than the despair.

Perhaps he was filled with anxiety. What will happen to him afterward? Will he be branded a murderer and expelled from all human community? How could his wife Sarah still live with him after he does something like this? How could he live with himself? But the promise turned out to be stronger than the guilt and fear.

No matter what painful emotions he experienced, whether these or others that we can't even imagine, the book of Hebrews tells us Abraham was willing to go through with it because "he considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead."

God promised Abraham numerous descendants through Isaac, and Abraham believed that promise, even though God himself seemed to be taking it away. The promise was stronger than Abraham's bitterness. The promise was stronger than Abraham's resignation. The promise was stronger than Abraham's anxiety.

And God makes that promise to us in various forms. The promise in baptism is, "You are my child. I am well pleased with you." Another promise is found in the Lord's Supper, "This is my blood, shed for the forgiveness of your sins." More generally, God's message to us in the gospel is, "I am your God, and you are my people. Your sins will not break or interfere with that relationship in the future."

But sometimes tragic events collide head-on with these promises. One father, whose little girl was hospitalized, said to the pastor, "I don't understand why God would let this happen to a child." The pastor replied, "I don't know either." What do we do when we feel that God has done us wrong?

One approach might be to put God on probation. You will not trust him until he shows himself worthy of your trust. So, if the little girl gets better, maybe the father will trust God again. But, if she dies, he will never walk through the church door again. And there is a kernel of truth here! The Psalms are filled with complaints against God for seeming to failing to keep his promises. Psalm 13 begins, "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day." And Psalm 44 cries out, "Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?"

These Psalms model for us a way to voice our complaint. But what you shouldn't do is wait until you figure everything out before you move forward in faith. If you take that approach, you will be paralyzed. Abraham certainly didn't wait until he could reconcile God's test with God's promise. When Hebrews says that Abraham considered that God could raise him from the dead, that is a way of saying that Abraham didn't know how God's promise could still be true, but he ascribed to God the power to keep his promise anyway. So, a better option is to live your faith out and see how it goes.

A Lutheran school teacher went through a divorce and was struggling with the question of whether she still believed in God or not. She felt God had let her down and just couldn't figure out where she was with her faith. But when she taught the faith to the students, she noticed that it still came out of her mouth with conviction, even though she might have doubts later at home.

Luther advises in a case like this to go ahead and experience the doubt since you can't help it anyway, but don't draw any firm conclusions. He says that the doubts are like birds. You cannot stop the birds from landing on your head, but you can stop them from nesting in your hair. So it wasn't a question of the teacher intellectually figuring out whether she believed. She just had to watch herself over time and perceive who she really was. You act out of faith, even if you can't articulate it.

In the end, the promises of God are what we have. Either they are enough for you, or they aren't. And if they are enough, then not even God himself can shake them.