

The blinding horror of Abraham's faith

It's dangerous to trust God in the face of suffering. It's more dangerous not to.

by [Ellen F. Davis](#) in the [October 25, 2016](#) issue



Caravaggio, The Sacrifice of Isaac, oil on canvas, 1601–1602.

A thought experiment: if they had asked me to edit the Bible (whoever “they” might be—perhaps the Holy Spirit, or the heavenly Council on Divinely Inspired Works) . . . if they had made me the original editor of the Bible, I would have made some substantial changes. The very first change would have been to get rid of the 22nd chapter of Genesis, the story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac. “It’s way too off-putting,” I would have argued. “Just listen to this: *And God said, Take your son, your only son, the one you love, Isaac, and take him to some as yet unspecified place, and offer him there as a burnt offering.* This is exactly the kind of story that gives the Old Testament a bad name,” I would have said. “It gives God a bad name. If you put this story just 22 chapters into the Bible, who is going to read the rest? Even if the story is true, who would want to believe in a God like this?”

Mine is a commonsense argument, which must have occurred to countless sensible people through the ages. Certainly the literary and theological geniuses who put together the book of Genesis must have considered this argument and dismissed it. Raising my sights, I imagine making my argument to the heavenly Council on Divinely Inspired Works, and after they have listened politely, they would tell me that I have completely missed the point. The point of this story is *not* to make people want to believe in Abraham's God—who is, of course, also Jesus' God and father. Rather, this harrowing story exists to help people who already believe make sense of their most difficult experience, when God seems to take back everything they have ever received at God's hand. In other words, the Holy Spirit and the heavenly council would tell me, the point is not to draw people in but rather to help people who are already in stay in—stay in relationship with the one true God, even when their world turns upside down.

This story appears front and center in Genesis, where no reader of the Bible can miss it, because the hard truth is that the world turns upside down for the faithful more often than we like to admit. I remember the words of my young friend, a devout Roman Catholic, just a few hours after his first child had died in birth, strangled by her umbilical cord. "I could say, Why me? But why not me? I knew this happens to people, and it never made me doubt God before. So why should I doubt God now? But still, I do not understand."

The 22nd chapter of Genesis is the place you go when you do not understand at all—Why does God allow us to suffer like this? Are we really expected to bear this?—and the last thing you want is a reasonable explanation, because any reasonable explanation would be a mockery of your anguish. This story of Abraham and God and Isaac is the place you go when you are out beyond anything you thought could or would happen, beyond anything you imagine God would ever ask of you, when the most sensible thing to do might be to deny that God exists at all, or deny that God cares at all, or deny that God has any power at all. That would be sensible, except you can't do it—because you are so deep into relationship with God that to deny all that would be to deny your own heart and soul and mind. To deny God any meaningful place in your life would be to deny your own existence. And so you are stuck with your pain and your incomprehension, and the only way to move at all is to move toward God, to move more deeply into this relationship that we call faith. That is what Abraham does: without comprehension, nearly blinded by the horror of what he has been told to do, Abraham follows God's lead, for the simple

and sufficient reason that it is God who is leading. To what end, Abraham has no idea.

It is quite common for theologians to hold up Abraham as a model of unquestioning obedience to God, but I think this is misleading and possibly even damaging to Abraham's character. After all, obedience is a virtue only if it serves a just cause. Obedience in service of an unjust cause is servile, cowardly, even criminal; that we learned definitively from Nuremberg and, in our own country, from the My Lai massacre. If it is purely out of obedience that Abraham submits to God's command, then his willingness to submit is monstrous. But there is another option. What if Abraham follows God's command not out of obedience, but out of faith? What if Abraham *trusts* God, even now, when what God asks of him seems to run counter to everything God had promised? (For the child Abraham is called to sacrifice is the child through whom God's promise of blessing is meant to unfold.)

It is trust, not obedience, that binds Abraham to God. This I learned from the great 20th-century Jewish theologian Eliezer Berkovits, who is one of the leading thinkers in Jewish theology after the Holocaust. In his probing and wrenching book *With God in Hell* (1979), Berkovits asks these questions: Why did so many Jews keep their faith in the ghettos and the Nazi death camps? Why did they gather to say prayers and keep sabbath, or circumcise their children as a sign of the covenant, even as the SS literally beat down the door? Why did they keep blessing God as the Holy One of Israel instead of cursing the God who seemed to have abandoned the Jews?

As he puzzles over these questions, Berkovits turns to this story of Abraham, and what he discovers is the bottomless trust that holds Abraham together with God. Here is what Berkovits imagines Abraham saying to God during those three days of hell as he follows God to Moriah, the place of unspeakable sacrifice:

In this situation I do not understand You. Your behavior violates our covenant; still, I trust You because it is You, because it is You and me, because it is us. . . . Almighty God! What you are asking of me is terrible. . . . But I have known you, my God. You have loved me and I love You. My God, you are breaking Your word to me. . . . Yet I trust You; I trust You.

What Berkovits shows is how intimate the relationship between God and Abraham is. Abraham is with God in hell, the way long- and well-married people are together in the worst moments of the life they share. The marriage metaphor is apt, because

Isaac is the child of this union between God and Abraham, the miraculous child of the promise of blessing and offspring. And in the strangest of all paradoxes, that is why Abraham is ready to do what God asks, even to the point of taking a knife to his child. Abraham trusts God totally with the life of the child they share, the life that God has given. In the midst of this life-shattering thing that he does not understand at all, Abraham knows only this: life and life with God are the same thing. Like the Jews who risked their lives to observe sabbath in the death camps or to circumcise children in the ghetto, Abraham is incapable of choosing survival—even his child's survival—over life with God. For better or for worse, it is simply too late for him to live apart from God.

Total, radical trust—this is the only thing that makes any sense of Abraham's submission to God. But still, we have to ask: Is God trustworthy? What kind of God would submit Abraham to this appalling “test,” as our story calls it? There are just two possible answers, and both are difficult. One answer is a sadistic deity who takes pleasure in human pain, but that answer is biblically impossible. If God is a sadist, then the rest of the Bible is a lie, and so is everything we say and sing in church.

And so I am forced to choose the only alternative: God calls for this test because God needs to know, desperately needs to know whether Abraham is completely devoted to God. It is theologically unconventional to say that God Almighty needs to know something God does not already know, but that is the clear logic of this test. Remember, Abraham is the person on whom God had chosen to rely completely. After the flood when God almost gave up on humanity, after we had filled the whole world with violence, God decided to move forward in relationship with the world. But there was a condition: from that point on, Abraham and his seed are the one channel for the dissemination of God's blessing. Abraham is like a prism: he focuses God's blessing and spreads it through the world like a rainbow stream of light.

God has staked everything on Abraham, even the whole world. Yet there is serious reason to doubt that Abraham has staked everything on God. Abraham and God have been in relationship for decades now—it is already a long marriage—but there are signs that Abraham still does not totally trust God, that he is still looking out for his own interest. You might remember those stories of Abraham passing off his beautiful wife Sarah as his sister when they travel in foreign territory. Sarah gets taken into the royal harem as a concubine, not once but twice, and Abraham gets protected status as her “brother.” God never tells Abraham to do that. He does it because he's scared; he might be killed if someone wants Sarah, knowing she's his

wife. Abraham puts Sarah in that terrible situation because he does not trust God to pull them through the danger.

Abraham's lack of trust puts God in a terrible situation, too. God is counting entirely on Abraham as the channel for overcoming the world's evil with divine blessing. If Abraham does not entirely trust God, then all hope is lost. If Abraham tries to secure his own well-being apart from God, if he holds back anything, even his beloved child, and tries to protect him from God, then it would be better if the world had never been made. That is what this test is about: trust, the delicate yet potentially durable link between God and ourselves on which everything, even the whole world, depends.

Placed front and center in the Bible, this story makes it clear that the thing we call faith is not in the first instance a matter of what we think about God, any more than a good marriage or our deepest friendships are held together by what we *think* about the other. The relationship endures only because two hearts are bound together through mutual trust. And trust is the very opposite of compulsion. Trust is how you relate to others when you don't try to control them by force of manipulation. The astonishing truth Genesis 22 reveals is that God chooses to relate to the world not by compulsion but by trust.

Yet trust is inherently a condition of vulnerability. You can be disappointed by the one you trust and deeply, deeply hurt. God's own trust makes God vulnerable; God is "grieved to the heart" by human evil, as the flood story in Genesis tells us (Gen. 6:6). We do not often think of God as needing to be courageous, yet it must take courage for God to stay in relationship with the world just as it takes courage for each of us to stay in relationship with God. We have already experienced grievous disappointment, and we know that more pain lies ahead in ways we dare not and should not try to imagine. Everyone and everything we love in this world is passing away, although later or sooner we do not know.

We have to ask: What kind of way is this for God to run the world—a way that is inevitably fraught with so much disappointment and pain on both sides? And the answer is: this is the way of love, for mutual trust is the only environment in which love is wholly free to act. We know this from the earliest intimacy, the relationship between parent and child. Trust is the only environment in which love is wholly free to act for our good.

It's the same in the relationship between the divine Parent and the Son. The absolute trust between God and Jesus is the environment in which divine Love is wholly free to act for the good of the world. The God who is wholly Love chooses to trust us, so that the fullness of divine power may be unleashed to work through the lives of those who trust God wholly. This is what we see in Jesus' cross, death, and resurrection: trusting love that suffers on both sides, and working through that love, God's boundless power to save. As Christians have always seen, there is a story line that runs straight from Abraham, Isaac, and God at Moriah to the cross and resurrection. It's the story of trusting Love on which the whole world depends.

Relationship with the real God, the God of Abraham and Jesus, is not for the risk-averse. The book of Genesis puts it to us straight: sometimes being in relationship with the real God hurts like hell. Sometimes it's bewildering: we'll be inching along in the dark, with no vision of where this relationship is taking us. But the gospel also puts it to us straight: it's taking us to the cross and on to resurrection. It's taking us straight into the arms of God. It's taking us into a parent's aching yet indomitable love, the divine Love that will not let us go—not ever. We can put our trust in that.

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