

There is one more troubling passage to look at, the strangest and most terrifying of them all, when Abraham attempts to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Bible scholar Phyllis Trible famously called it a “text of terror,” because what God asks Abraham to do is horrific, even monstrous. “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you” (Genesis 22:2). Nowadays, such a scenario would warrant a police raid and the intervention of Child Protective Services!

God fulfilled the covenant by giving Abraham a son, Isaac; and through this boy all the families of the earth are supposed to be blessed. But how can this happen if Abraham kills the boy? The Bible does not answer that question. It just tells the story, in all its raw and terrifying detail, culminating in these two gruesome sentences: “[Abraham] bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son” (Genesis:9-10). Abraham was ready and willing to kill his only son because God asked him to do it!

What sort of monster does such a thing? What sort of God demands such a sacrifice? Such are the questions we bring to this difficult text, but the Bible does not answer them. Yet, when can assume when God says, “Take...your only son Isaac, whom you love,” that God knows exactly the agony this unspeakable act will bring to Abraham. Thankfully, in the end, the worst *doesn't* happen. An angel shows up in the nick of time, saying: “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him.” God provides an alternative: a ram conveniently trapped in a thicket. Abraham “took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son” (Genesis 22:12-13).

You could say Abraham is a lucky man. He laughs at God and gets away with it. He banishes a mother and son into the desert with no repercussions. He fibs to Pharaoh and lives to tell the tale. Now he's about to sacrifice his only son to prove his faithfulness to God. This time it seems that life sent Abraham down a blind alley. He is staring at a brick wall, with no way out. Then, suddenly, miraculously, he notices a door. His salvation is a ram caught in a thicket. Lucky Abraham! It seems that no matter what misfortune occurs, Abraham's luck holds and he finds a way out!

Our culture values luck, especially in Las Vegas or Atlantic City. Or in any convenience store where you can plunk down a couple of bucks and buy a lottery ticket. There are lots of things people do to try to improve their luck. A popular folktale says that if you bury a statue of St. Joseph upside-down in your yard, you will sell your house quicker. Who knows where that crazy superstition comes from? But there are people who swear by it.

Outside a little shop in San Francisco, CA, there is a statue of a laughing Buddha on a little table. A handwritten sign, hung just above the statue, says “For wisdom, rub my head. For good luck, rub my belly.” Guess which part of the statue had all the paint rubbed off? (Hint: it's not the head, the seat of wisdom.) It seems people value good luck even more than wisdom! Thomas Edison used to enjoy quoting: “Opportunity is missed by most people because it's dressed in overalls and looks like work.” Edison thought people would rather rub Buddha's tummy than do a little hard work.

“[Most Americans] believe that if we have had success in life, it is mainly the result of our own hard work, and we therefore have an absolute right to use our money as we see fit,” writes Pastor Tim Keller. “But while the Bible agrees industriousness or the lack of it is an irreplaceable part of why you are successful or not (Proverbs 6:9-11; 10:4), it is never the main reason....If you have money, power, and status today, it is due to the century and place in which you were born, to your talents and capacities and health, none of which you earned...all your resources are in the end the gift of God.” Too often we fail to recognize that, in both the good and the bad, God is working the Divine plan.

Abraham has no end of personal flaws and shortcomings, yet he turns out to be a pretty good theologian. Abraham never seems to think his discovery of the ram in the thicket has anything to do with luck. When it begins to dawn on poor Isaac what his father is contemplating, he asks, “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” Abraham replies cryptically, “God...will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” After they discover the ram trapped in the thicket and everything is said and done, the Bible says, “Abraham called that place ‘The LORD will provide’” (Genesis 22:7-8, 14). The word “provide” appears three times in this distressing story. Although it may resemble luck, this is really a story about God's *providence*. Providence is how God generously provides us with the essentials of life. We would do well to rely on God's providence a little more confidently than we do. Forget the lottery tickets. Forget Saint Joseph buried in the yard. Forget Buddha's tummy. God's gracious providence that gets us through, not luck.

This does not mean we will get everything we want in life. God is not a great cosmic vending machine, dispensing all the goodies our greedy heart's desire. There will be times when things decidedly *don't* go our way; but that does not mean God's providence is not at work. When hopes are dashed, when the opportunity is missed, when the diagnosis is bad, when someone we love disappoints us, it just may be that God's providence *provides* us with what we need to tough it out.

## What's Better Than Luck?

Sunday, June 28, 2026

Genesis 22:1-14

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

In another Bible story, the Israelites are poised to enter the promised land. It will be tough going because they must fight the Canaanites to claim God's promise. Moses, their 120-year-old leader, does not have it in him to cross the Jordan River with them, so he gives them some parting words of encouragement: "Be strong and bold; have no fear or dread of them [the Canaanites], because it is the LORD your God who goes with you; [God] will not fail you or forsake you" (Deuteronomy 31:6). If you understand, deep within you, the truth of those words, if you know in your heart that no matter what happens, God will never fail you or forsake you, then you have gone a long way toward realizing what an important role God's providence plays in your life.

Providence is something the founders of our nation understood. George Washington used the word "providence" frequently in his speeches and letters. On October 27, 1777, at a low point in the struggle for independence, Washington penned a letter to Landon Carter, reassuring him: "I flatter myself that a superintending Providence is ordering everything for the best, and that, in due time, all will end well." On June 11, 1783, after the struggle was over, Washington wrote to the Rev. John Rodgers: "Glorious indeed has been our Contest: glorious, if we consider the Prize for which we have contended, and glorious in its Issue; but in the midst of our Joys, I hope we shall not forget that, to divine Providence is to be ascribed the Glory and the Praise."

Reformer John Calvin agrees, saying: "We must know that God's providence, as it is taught in Scripture, is opposed to fortune or fortuitous happenings. Now it has been commonly accepted in all ages, and almost all mortals hold the same opinion today, that all things come about through chance...But anyone who has been taught by Christ's lips that all the hairs of his head are numbered [Matthew 10:30] will look farther afield for a cause, and will consider that all events are governed by God's secret plan."

"God will provide" is the same lesson learned centuries earlier by Abraham through all his ill-considered schemes, narrow scrapes, and hair-raising adventures. Abraham learned to trust his peripheral vision; to glimpse, off to the side, the ram in the thicket. Abraham saw the signs that God is ever faithful and may be trusted to give us all we truly need in life.

Prayer: Lord, I entrust my life to You, knowing You understand my needs and work all things for my good. Please guide my steps, grant me peace, and strengthen my faith to rely on Your perfect providence rather than worry. I surrender my fears and trust in Your faithful care. Amen.

### Sources:

- Timothy J. Keller, *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just* (Penguin, 2012), 89.
- John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I. xvi. 2.

Abraham is a revered figure in the Bible, the original "patriarch" of three faiths, and the epitome of faithfulness. The writer of Hebrews says: "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going" (Hebrews 11:8). God called. Abraham obeyed. But even the great biblical heroes of the Bible can have serious flaws and feet of clay.

Remember when the Lord promised Abraham and Sarah that would have a child in their old age? They believe it at first. They laughed in the face of God's generosity. Then they grew impatient to see God's promise fulfilled. They cooked up a little scheme to solve their infertility problem by having Abraham conceive a son with Sarah's slave, Hagar (Genesis 15-16). No one sought Hagar's consent for this arrangement. Later Abraham would banish Hagar and her son, Ishmael, to soothe Sarah's resentment (Genesis 21). This was not Abraham and Sarah's finest moment.

Nor was it their finest hour when, to survive a famine, Abraham-and-Sarah travel to Egypt. Fearing the Egyptian men will desire his good-looking wife, and worried they may murder him to get her, Abraham passes Sarah off as his unmarried sister. Sure enough, Pharaoh takes a liking to Sarah and demands that Abraham give her to him. Fearing Pharaoh's wrath if the lie is exposed, Abraham agrees to Pharaoh's demand and sends Sarah off to the palace. It's a scandalous story! Things don't go well for Pharaoh after that: God sends a series of plagues upon Pharaoh's household. Ultimately, word gets back to Pharaoh that these misfortunes happened because Pharaoh took the wife of another man (quite unwittingly on Pharaoh's part, but that doesn't seem to matter). Disgusted with Abraham's devious ways, Pharaoh sends Sarah back to her husband and sends the couple packing. Abraham is no paragon of virtue in this story.

So, it's clear that God didn't single out Abraham to bless because of Abraham's high moral principles. The initiative is entirely on God's side. If God had reasons for choosing Abraham, the Bible never tells us what they are. Yet, it is to this deeply flawed man that God makes three great promises: Abraham would be the founding father of a great nation; Abraham's name would be revered; and through Abraham all the nations of the world would be blessed. Not bad for a scoundrel like Abraham; but remember, these blessings are gifts from God, not blessings earned by Abraham's faithful behavior.