

There's never a convenient time for your car to break down is there? I mean who enjoys sitting at the side of the road waiting for the tow truck to come? Who likes spending time (and money) at the mechanic's? No one that I know of. But have you ever considered why we don't spend more time there? I mean the average car has 1800 parts including engine, tires, and spark plugs. Isn't it amazing that this complex machine doesn't break down more often? Almost without fail your car will start with a simple flick of the wrist even when it is -40C outside. How have cars become so reliable? Because of years of vigorous testing. Car companies put their vehicles through all kinds of tests because they want to provide a reliable product so you'll remain a loyal customer.

As we watch Abraham today on his journey of faith, we're going to see how God also put him through some vigorous testing. God didn't do this to find out whether or not Abraham had faith because God knows all things. Rather with this test God was refining Abraham's faith so that it would run even more reliably. Since God doesn't want our faith to sputter to a halt halfway to heaven he also puts us through vigorous tests. I want to encourage you to embrace those tests of faith, just as Abraham did.

About a year after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Sarah gave birth to a son and named him Isaac. Finally, after 25 years, God's promise had come true! The 100-year-old Abraham must have doted on his son, and not just because he liked kids, but because this son was his connection to the promised Savior. That's why the test God had in mind for Abraham was no simple matter.

God kicked things off when he called for Abraham, and without hesitation Abraham replied: "Here I am!" Although Abraham may have been busy tending to his flocks at the time, or looking over his investments, he put down whatever he was doing to give God his full attention. Are you following in Abraham's footsteps? When God comes calling in the person of your pastor or fellow Christian do you give him your full attention, or does the call seem like an intrusion? It will feel that way if we have lost sight of what we're supposed to be doing here on earth: not building a comfortable life for ourselves, but building up our faith as we journey to heaven. So when God comes calling, give him your full attention! He comes to help and encourage.

So what was it that God wanted of Abraham? Not much. He just wanted Abraham to take his son Isaac and sacrifice him as a burnt offering. But if Abraham followed through with this command, he would have been like the scuba diver who cuts the hose to his oxygen tank, for as I said earlier, Isaac was Abraham's connection to the Savior! So it's amazing that we don't hear any objections from Abraham. He didn't even say, "Can you repeat that Lord? It sounded like you said you wanted me to kill my son. I must have misheard." Instead we're told that early the next morning Abraham saddled his donkey, cut some firewood, and then led his son and two servants on a trek to a place called Moriah. Abraham did not hesitate in his obedience. And we shouldn't think that this was just a knee-jerk reaction—that he obeyed the Lord before he could fully comprehend what he was doing. No, he had all night to think about the journey, and the journey itself took three days and yet he remained dedicated to God's command to offer his son as a sacrifice.

That kind of singular dedication boggles the modern mind. When our spouse asks us to do a time-consuming and difficult task, we may want them to explain why to us. When we were

kids and mom asked us to clean up our room, the response might have been, “How come?” or “Why now?” not “OK.” When our Pastor encourages us to come to Bible study, we may feel we already know enough, or that worship is all we do, or we just don’t have time for one more church activity. That’s not focused dedication to God’s will. And so he will send trials our way to refine our faith in him. He will put us in situations where we are forced to rely on his mercy and to hold on to his promises as if to a climbing rope lest we fall into a crevasse. And he’ll lead us to see that holding on to his promises for dear life isn’t a bad way to live, as Abraham himself knew firsthand.

So what was going through Abraham’s mind as he journeyed to Moriah? How could he so readily embrace this test God had placed before him? Listen to this passage from the New Testament. “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, 18 even though God had said to him, ‘It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.’ 19 Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death” (Hebrews 11:17–19).

Did you catch why Abraham embraced this trial? He reasoned that if he did burn his son to ashes, God would have to raise Isaac back to life. Why? Because God had clearly said that the line of the savior would go through Isaac. Since Abraham knew that God keeps all of his promises, he was certain that he would keep this one as well. We hear Abraham express this faith when 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” (Genesis 22:5).

Abraham places the wood on his son Isaac. Isaac is no little boy. He is a grown man, capable of carrying a substantial load of wood up the mountain, enough wood for a sacrifice. Abraham carried the fire, perhaps some coals in a small pot. He also carried the knife. Isaac assumes the wood, the fire and the knife will be used to sacrifice a lamb to the Lord. He asks his father, “The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering.” The father tells his son, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” All of his life Isaac had heard the stories his father told him about how the Lord provides and how the Lord promises and keeps his promises. If his dad tells him the Lord will provide a lamb, then it was only a matter of time before the Lord would lead them to a lamb that could be used for the sacrifice.

Then it says, “The two of them walked on together.” We have to assume that as they walked together, Abraham explains to Isaac what is going to happen to him. By the time they reach the top of the mountain Isaac is willing to let his father take his life, because he too is convinced that the Lord will keep his promise to bring back to life again.

Abraham and Isaac’s trust in the Lord was not misplaced. When he and Isaac reached the top of Mt. Moriah, he bound his son and laid him on top of the altar. Then he grabbed the knife to plunge it into his son. That’s when the Angel of the Lord stopped Abraham. We’ve already met the Angel of the Lord. He wasn’t a created angel because he explained that Isaac had been meant as a sacrifice to him. No created angel would accept worship that was only meant for God. Bible students have identified the Angel of the Lord as the pre-incarnate Christ, that is, the Son of God before he took on human flesh and became Jesus.

Not only did the Angel of the Lord stop Abraham from killing his son, he also provided a

substitute by way of a ram that was caught in a thicket nearby. Abraham sacrificed that animal in place of Isaac. Can you imagine the flood of relief that washed over Isaac as he watched the ram's throat being slit and the fire eat away at the ram's flesh? That knife and that fire had been meant for him!

That's also the relief we should feel whenever we think of Jesus' death on the cross—a death which took place only a stone's throw away from where Abraham and Isaac had stood on Mt. Moriah. There, God did what he would not let Abraham do: sacrifice his Son. That's good news because no matter how hard we try we never put our faith in the Lord with complete obedience. Instead we argue that the things God has told us to do are out of date, don't make fiscal sense, and in our estimation make life more difficult than it needs to be. What should God do with such arrogance? How should he treat creatures who talk back to him, the Creator? He should destroy us, but instead he saves us. As the ram took Isaac's place on the altar of Moriah, Jesus took our place on the cross of Calvary and suffered the piercing blow of God's wrath for our sins.

Abraham would name that place "The Lord Will Provide." It was an echo of something he had said to Isaac as they climbed the mountain together. Isaac had wanted to know where the lamb was for the sacrifice. Abraham simply replied, "The Lord will provide." It's what God has promised to do for you—to always provide. The Apostle Paul wrote: "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?" (Romans 8:32) Remember that when he sends a trial your way. If the trial is a sickness, he will give you the strength you need each day until he calls you home. If that trial is financial, he will teach you that you really can get along without cable, and can live with just one used car. If that trial comes in the form of a slight, you can still surrender your anger to the one who exacts justice perfectly.

Remember too that God sends you a trial to benefit others. Wasn't that true of Abraham's trial of faith? Couldn't we argue that his trial was really more for us than it was for him? God used Abraham as a living example of how his commands can be fully obeyed even when they don't seem to make much sense. So when a trial comes your way, consider how God is giving you an opportunity to demonstrate to others how believers handle difficulty. They do so with a God-given peace that surpasses all understanding. And through this demonstration of God's grace in your life, others may be led to want to know more about this God that you worship and trust.

So yes, embrace the trials God sends your way. Embrace them because it's evidence that he really does care about you. If he didn't care about you, he wouldn't bother refining your faith, just as some coaches don't bother working on the skills of players they know will never see any playing time. And when a fellow believer is going through a trial, do all you can to encourage that individual by continually pointing him to Jesus. If God did not withhold his Son from us, is there anything that we should withhold from our Lord? No. We can surrender all things—our will, our grudges, our pride, our time and money, we can surrender it all and we won't lose a thing, for with Jesus we have everything that we need for this life and for the next. Amen.