

"After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, '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 of which I shall tell you.' So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. Then Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.' And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, 'My father!' And he said, 'Here I am, my son.' He said, 'Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?' Abraham said, 'God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.' So they went both of them together. When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.' And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place, 'The LORD will provide'; as it is said to this day, 'On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided.' And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven and said, 'By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.'"

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

Over the centuries, there have been more than a few Christians who have been troubled and confused by our text today. Of all the stories in the bible, the account of Abraham offering up Isaac is one of the most difficult for people to understand, and definitely one of the most unexpected scenes in all of Scripture. It just catches us by surprise that the God of grace, mercy and forgiveness who says He only wants the best for His people; the God of life and salvation who had blessed Abraham with this son should suddenly seem so different, as to ask Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. This is all the more surprising when we realize that this same God has condemned most strongly the whole practice of human sacrifice. ***"There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering"*** (Deuteronomy 18:10, ESV) God tells us, as He outlaws and condemns anyone who practices child sacrifice, which was commonly done by many people to appease the god Moloch. But now, the God who said He detested the practice of human sacrifice, says to Abraham: ***"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 of which I shall tell you."*** All of this is so troubling—not only because of the contradiction we see in this request of God, but also by our fear that perhaps God will ask the same thing of us, and we could not bear the thought of having to do this.

As we study the Scriptures we see that God is a God of the unexpected. The true and only God has a wise and loving purpose behind everything He does. As strange as it may seem, God did this to test Abraham, to strengthen Abraham's faith by forcing Abraham to examine who was most important to him: His God and Lord or his son Isaac, his only son, whom he loved. In this unexpected event, God is also pointing us to all He will do for us in Christ. God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son as a test of his love and obedience to God. In an even greater way, God will show His great love for us, ***"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."*** (John 3:16, ESV)

God is a God of the unexpected. He works in strange and mysterious ways to accomplish His purposes. While He may do things that are unexpected, we can be sure of this: whatever He may say or do, He will always be at work to bless the people He loves.

At first glance, it is hard to understand why God would ask something like this of Abraham. But then, there are many times when God's mysterious ways are beyond our comprehension; so many times when it is virtually impossible to understand why

God does the things that He does. A child dies of cancer, or contracts AIDS through a blood transfusion. These things don't make sense to us. They don't seem fair or logical. We wonder how a loving God can allow this to happen. We have the same trouble when any difficulty, pain or suffering comes into our life. Day by day, the people of our congregation have to come to grips with things that don't make sense to them. We wonder why it is that good people, good, faithful, devoted people in the church suddenly find themselves struggling with an illness or a problem in their family that just seems more than they should have to bear. We are concerned about the future, because we know we live in a dark and uncertain world. Read all the things that Jesus points to as signs of the end and as signs of His coming in Matthew 24, and doesn't that make you think? The church is so often hated and despised in the world today. That makes us wonder, too. Why does God allow these things? Doesn't He love us? Doesn't He want what is best for us?

I can imagine Abraham asking similar questions of God. He may have been confused and frustrated by God's command. It just didn't make sense! God had promised Abraham many descendants, and then made Abraham wait until he was 100 years old for his only son to be born. Now God was asking him to give up that son, his beloved, only son. It doesn't take a great deal of imagination to realize how difficult this was for Abraham. But Abraham was committed by covenant to be faithful to God. He had consecrated his son to the Lord through the rite of circumcision. What God was now asking was difficult. It was unexpected, but Abraham will be obedient to his Lord and God.

Of course, we know as we look back through history that everything did work out for the best. Abraham was ready to sacrifice his son. Isaac was bound and on the altar; the knife was in Abraham's hand, raised to kill his son, when suddenly the Lord calls to Him and says: ***"Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."*** The God who had asked the unexpected now does the unexpected, saving Isaac, and even providing a ram for the sacrifice in place of Isaac.

Most people have heard the quote from the hymn by William Cowper which says: *God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform.* (LSB 765, st. 1) This whole incident with Abraham and Isaac is proof of that. God asks the unexpected: offer up Isaac. God does the unexpected: He saves Isaac and provides a ram for the sacrifice. In doing all this God strengthens both Abraham and Isaac in their faith, teaching them that not only is their faith in God worth any sacrifice, but also that God has a purpose in all things, and that He does provide for his people in the most unexpected times and circumstances. God grant that we never lose sight of this truth! Day by day we find ourselves wrestling with those things we don't understand. Things happen, circumstances arise, troubles come in which it seems that God has forgotten us, that God is being unfaithful to His promises to us. And we find ourselves asking, "why, Lord? Why are you doing this to me? What do you want from me? What is all of this supposed to teach me?" Sometimes the only answer God gives is the one He gave the psalmist: ***"Be still, and know that I am God."*** (Psalm 46:10, ESV) God requires the complete and total consecration of His people, just as we see in Abraham. Faith means having a complete and total commitment to God. If we are truly God's people, then we will surrender our will to His will, giving Him 100% of our loyalty and obedience. At times, that is hard, because it may mean that we have to give up more than we want. It may mean the quiet acceptance of things we don't understand. But then, God's greatest gifts are so often seen in the most unexpected of ways, in the most unexpected of places. God, whose wisdom is so much higher than ours does not necessarily work as we would expect. He does not do the things that we always expect Him to do. But God always knows what is best. He knows what is most important for His people, and He works to provide it.

When you stop and think about it, isn't the wonderful grace of God in Christ the ultimate example of God's unexpected ways? We know that we have done nothing that is worthy of God's love and forgiveness. We know that we don't deserve even the least of the blessings God does give us day after day. What God has every right to do—what He should do—is send down fire from heaven that consumes us, because we are wicked, sinful people. But God doesn't do what we should expect. Instead, He sends down His Son, the Son who, like that ram, takes our place as the sacrifice.

There is a hymn that speaks of Jesus' sacrifice and of what so often amounts to our empty response. *"I gave my life for thee; my precious blood I shed, that thou might ransom be, and quickened from the dead. I gave my life for thee. What hast thou given for me?"* (TLH 405, st. 1) Paul makes this all the more dramatic when he reminds us: ***"but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."*** (Romans 5:8, ESV) Even though we are not in the least bit worthy of it, Jesus does the unexpected when He gives His life for us on the cross. His resurrection is even more unexpected, as God fulfills all His promises to His people, giving us the assurance of life and forgiveness through that miracle, through the resurrection of Christ.

God's power at work in the unexpected things can, and does, assure us that even when we don't know why things are happening, even when we can't see anything good in what is happening to us, even when it seems God is asking too much of

us, that He will work to do what needs to be done for our good. He did it for Abraham and Isaac, even when it seemed that He was contradicting all of His gracious promises. He will do it for us, too. The God who has done the unexpected, bringing salvation to sinners like you and me, will continue to work in His mysterious ways to provide for His people and deliver them out of their troubles into the joys of life with Him. Even if it doesn't seem to be working out as we would expect, never forget that God works in the unexpected to do what we need the most. Amen.