

When God Throws a Curveball

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[0 : 00] Well, I'm not much of a baseball player. I know Byron is.

But from my few moments where I have had the opportunity to play, I know that if there's one thing that you don't want, it's for the pitcher to throw a curveball when you're up to bat.

You want that ball to just come straight across the plate so you can just get a clean hit. But you don't want to see what some of us have seen at the last moment as it begins to all of a sudden change direction and go somewhere that you didn't expect it to.

Even if you haven't played baseball, maybe you've had that moment or experienced that before. A ball's coming towards you or a frisbee or something, and you think you know where it's going to go, and then all of a sudden at the last minute, it just totally curves and goes way off from where you thought it would go.

Well, curveballs are not just things that we see in the fields. Oftentimes, those kind of moments happen to us in life, whether in the big story picture of our lives or in the details of a given day.

[1 : 22] Things are going well, or at least we're at peace with the troubles in our lives, and then seemingly out of nowhere, something happens.

Something perhaps unexpected or unplanned for. Something that maybe leads us to the place where we're asking the question, God, why?

Why this? Why now? God has a way of bringing curveballs into our life, whether we like it or not.

How do we handle those situations? What do we do in those moments? How do we hit a home run when a curveball comes at us?

If you have your Bible with you, please open it to Genesis chapter 22. This morning, we're going to be looking at a time when Abraham had the craziest curveball, probably that anyone has experienced, brought his way.

[2 : 41] Genesis chapter 22, verse 1. Sometime later, God tested Abraham.

He said to him, Abraham, Here I am, he replied. Then God said, Take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the region of Moriah.

Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you. So here Abraham is, he's, we've been working through his story here together as a church.

Things have been going well for him. God has blessed him. God has protected him. God has turned all these things that have gone wrong into blessings. It's gone well.

The promised son, Isaac, has been born. And then seemingly out of nowhere, God gives Abraham this command.

[3 : 56] I want you to go to the region of Moriah, take your son, whom you love, and sacrifice him to me there as a burnt offering.

Why would God ask Abraham to do such a thing? Why would he do that?

Even the thought of it is deeply upsetting to us. Can you imagine how Abraham would have felt?

God, why?

you want me to offer my own son as a sacrifice? You want me to kill my own son?

Why? God gives us only one clue as to why in verse 1. It says, sometime later, God tested Abraham.

[4 : 58] This was a test. He was testing Abraham. But Abraham didn't know that it was a test. And again, we might wonder, well, why would God do something like this?

Something so horrible, asking him to kill his own son? And if that's how we think about it and feel about it, then think and feel how much more Abraham would have thought and felt that and wrestled and struggled with this command in that moment.

God acknowledges how difficult this is going to be. Do you see how he describes Isaac in verse 2? He says, your only son. Of course, Ishmael has been sent away and Isaac is all that's left.

Not only your only son, but your only son whom you love. how could God ask this? We can only imagine how perplexed and confused Abraham must have felt at this moment.

I mean, was it not the Lord that told me that Sarah would bear a son and that he was to inherit the promises of this covenant as an everlasting covenant?

[6 : 28] Was it not you, Lord, who told me that it is through Isaac that my offspring shall be reckoned and now you're asking me to do this? That doesn't make sense.

Abraham has a curveball thrown at him from God. How does Abraham respond? Verse 3. Early the next morning, Abraham got up and loaded his donkey.

He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. On the third day, Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance.

He said to 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.

The first thing we notice about Abraham's response is just how quickly he gets to obeying the Lord's command. Did you see that in verse 3? The next morning, Abraham got up and began to make preparations.

[7 : 45] And not just the next morning, but early the next morning. there was no delay in Abraham's obedience. But can you imagine how he must have felt as there he is cutting the wood, knowing what the wood is going to be used for?

can you imagine how he must have been feeling as for two days they walked together, he and his son Isaac, all the while Abraham knowing what was coming.

Can you imagine how what must have been going on in Abraham's heart as he finally looked up on the third day and saw the place where this was all to happen?

But there's this interesting thing that Abraham says when it comes to the moment to leave the servants behind and for Abraham and Isaac to go up the hill where the sacrifice is to be offered, he says this, he says to the 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. Well, what do you mean Abraham? What do you mean we will come back to you?

[9 : 09] Why did he say that? Was he trying to hide from Isaac what was about to happen? Was this kind of a lie? Or did Abraham expect or hope that somehow this wasn't going to happen?

God wasn't going to have him kill his own son. Abraham and Isaac continue on.

Verse 6, Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, Father, yes, my son, Abraham replied, the fire and the wood are here, Isaac said, but where's the lamb for the burnt offering?

This must have been a heart-wrenching moment for Abraham. Dad, the fire and the wood are here, where's the lamb for the sacrifice?

Can you imagine that moment? Think of those of you who have kids, think if you were in that situation and it was your own child who looked at you and said, Dad, where's the lamb?

[10 : 39] What would you say? This is what Abraham said. Abraham answered, God himself will provide the lamb for the sacrifice, my son.

Again, we're wondering, just what did he mean by that? One commentator said, you know, what is this? Is this a masterpiece of pious evasion?

doesn't seem to really be answering the question. Or is this a statement of faith? God's going to look after it.

He's going to take care of it. He's going to provide the lamb. Thankfully, we know the answer. In the inspired commentary of the author of Hebrews, thousands of years later, the author of Hebrews tells us that this was a moment in which Abraham displayed great faith in God.

This was a statement of faith. God himself will provide the lamb for the sacrifice, my son. That word provide is literally see.

[12 : 04] God will see. One commentator I think captures it really well. God will see to it the lamb for the sacrifice. my son.

Does Abraham know how this is going to work out? I don't think so. And yet he expresses his trust in the Lord. God's going to look after it, my son.

He's going to take care of it. He will provide. verse 9.

When they reached the place God had told him about it, Abraham built an altar there, and he arranged the wood on it, and he bound his son Isaac, and he laid him on the altar on top of the wood.

Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, Abraham, Abraham, here I am, he replied.

[13:25] Do not lay a hand on the boy, he said. Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.

What a moment this must have been for Abraham, even the way it's written here in the original language, gives us the sense that he's going through the processes of preparing the sacrifice. He builds the altar, he gets the wood onto it, and all along the way we're hoping and we're expecting with Abraham that God's going to intervene and say, actually, no, you don't have to do this.

He gets to that moment where he has to tie up his own son. And we don't really know how Isaac was feeling in this moment. We can only imagine.

We assume that he allowed himself to be tied, that he submitted to his father's will, and that he trusted his father with this, allowing himself to be bound and put up on the altar.

[14:44] We don't know. Did he question his father's love in that moment? We don't know. But it's not until the last moment when Abraham has made the decision to obey God that God intervenes and speaks to him from heaven.

He tells him twice, don't do anything to him. Don't lay a hand on him. Despite the command that Abraham had been given, the Lord's will all along was not that he would harm his son Isaac or do anything to him.

This was a test. And the results were in. Abraham passed the test with flying colors, and the results were this.

The Lord says, now I know that you fear God because you have not withheld from me. your son, your only son.

Let's not trip over those words, now I know. It's not as though God didn't know what Abraham would do. We might wonder, well, why did he test him anyway?

[16:02] If God knows everything, if he knew what Abraham would do, why did he test him in the first place? God values real experiential relationship kind of knowledge.

Think of it in terms of a natural disaster. It's one thing to know that a natural disaster is coming. It's another thing to go through it and to know personally the devastation that it causes.

I think that's the way that we're meant to read this. When the Lord says, now I know, it's not that he didn't know before. It's that now it's confirmed in reality, in experience, in relationship, that you fear God.

That you fear God. The fear of God is a rich and meaningful phrase that is found throughout the whole Bible. but it's more than just an afraidness of God, being afraid of him.

It has to do with a deep reverence for God, a regard for him that controls the way that we live, the way that we relate to him. At its core, it means taking God seriously for who he is and for what he has said.

[17:30] and it's not portrayed in scripture as a negative thing to fear God. Rather, it's portrayed as a good thing, a positive thing, a thing that's right, that's proper.

That's what this test was all about. This word from the Lord is really a commendation. He's commending Abraham. The results of the test are in and you have a proper fear, a good and right fear of me as you should.

And the evidence of that is that you have obeyed my command. And not just any command, but a hard command. You have not withheld from me your son.

Do you notice the link there between fear of God and obedience? genuine fear of God.

If we have that, the evidence will be that we obey him, that we take his word seriously. As it pertains to faith, that's really what we've been looking at in this series.

[18:46] Fear of God and faith in God are really two sides of the same coin. At the end of the day, they both have at their core taking God seriously for who he is and what he has said.

And if we look back through this story leading up to this moment where he goes to sacrifice Isaac, it's not afraidness, afraidness that we've seen, it's faith. It's trust. We will come back to you. God will provide the lamb required for the sacrifice. And that's exactly what happened in a very tangible way. Abraham looked up and there in a thicket, he saw a ram, a male sheep caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place, the Lord will provide.

[19 : 56] And to this day, it is said, on the mountain of the Lord, it will be provided. God then confirms and goes on to express again and expand upon even the promises that he has made. Because you have done this, you have this fear of me, this faith in me, and have obeyed me like this, I will surely do everything that I've promised and a little bit more. Abraham then returns to his servants with Isaac and they set off together for Beersheba. Let's take a moment to consider the inspired commentary on this story from Hebrews. Hebrews chapter 11 verse 17. This is what the Lord had to say about that moment long ago. By faith, Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice.

[21 : 12] He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. Now watch this. Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead. And so in a manner of speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death. Do you hear what the Lord is saying there? Abraham had amazing faith in this moment. He knew that he must obey and offer the sacrifice and he also believed with all his heart that God would keep the promises made concerning Isaac. He believed both and so that leaves only two possibilities, doesn't it? The one possibility is that God will stop me before I kill Isaac on the altar. and the other possibility is that if God actually expects me to kill my son, he's going to raise him back to life from the dead because he will keep his promise and the promise was made to Isaac and his descendants.

[22 : 30] Isn't that amazing? Abraham believed God for a miracle. Do you realize the position that he was put in? He was asked to do something and if he succeeded in doing it, it would cause the promise to fail. The promise was made that Isaac would inherit the land and his descendants would be this great numerous offspring. If Abraham kills Isaac, the promise fails, doesn't it? God put him in that position on purpose where he had this conundrum and Abraham passed the test with flying colors. He believed both that God would keep his promise 100% about Isaac and that God would provide the lamb that was needed for the sacrifice that was required for his sins. What an amazing moment. What an amazing example. I love this story. I love this story most of all because of all the parallels, the rich parallels that it has to the gospel, to the story of Jesus.

[23 : 51] Some people here see a whole bunch of coincidences and I used to be one of those people. people know what I'm not anymore. I do believe that Moses did not know what all of these parallels would be as he wrote this story down under the inspiration of the Spirit. But I believe that God knew that these parallels were here and not just knew but that it was intentional. Think about the story of Jesus for a moment as I recount just a few of the details of this story. A promised son must be sacrificed and not just any son but an only son, a son deeply loved by his father. And this sacrifice will be the ultimate test of his father's character. This son was made to carry the wood up the hill. to his death. The son doesn't resist or protest but submits to his father in trusting silence.

[25 : 06] The father is willing to do what is required, even if it means he must offer his own son as a sacrifice. from the perspective of Isaac, whether we understand it or not, God has required our death because of sin.

Yet at just the right moment, God intervenes to provide an acceptable substitute so that we can go free and unharmed.

the lesson that we see here is that God will provide the lamb needed for the sacrifice that God has required for sins.

And we are even pointed to the reality that was going on in Abraham's heart, that if the son should die, we should trust that God can raise him from the dead.

[26 : 12] God, are all these parallels coincidence? I don't think so. This is not the only place where God does this thing.

He does it all throughout the Old Testament. He tells what is yet to come long before it happens. Not necessarily always with words, but sometimes with the events of history themselves.

I see it as God's signature authenticating that this story is his. And this is where we see for the first time the beginning to the answer of this great question.

We came up to this question earlier. Abraham is a sinner. He's blown it. We've watched it. And yet God is counting him righteous, treating him as though he is not a sinner.

How can he do that and be just? It's here that Abraham is being led to that place where he embraces that God will provide the lamb required, the sacrifice required for his sins.

[27 : 31] if we miss these parallels, we miss the good news. We miss the gospel that's here for us.

Finally, what do we learn about faith from this story? That's kind of what we've been focusing on in this series, faith. There is so much that we could pull out of this passage, but I want to just take one specific angle, and I'm indebted to Dale Ralph Davis and his sermon, or I don't know if it's a sermon, it was put into a book, but he had a chapter on this in his book and kind of helped me to see this angle.

So some of what I'm going to say is borrowed from him. What do we learn about faith from Abraham? Well, first of all, our situation is not the same as his. God spoke with an audible voice to him and required this of him.

That's not the situation that we find ourselves in today. But perhaps we do find ourselves in an Abraham-like situation, a situation where God has brought something into our life or allowed something to happen that we don't understand, a situation where perhaps we're asking the question like Abraham did.

Why God? Why this? Why now? Perhaps a situation in which we look at the promises that we've been given in the word of God and we look at our situation, we wonder how can these be true?

[29 : 22] You said, Lord, that you are our refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble and yet look at the mess of my life. Where are you?

Times when we are wondering about God himself. what we thought we knew about him doesn't seem to be holding true.

We can't make heads or tails of what God is doing in this situation. Deep down in our hearts, maybe we even feel like we have a problem with his ways.

how do we handle those kinds of situations? I believe that God's given us Abraham's story as an example and very simply that as Abraham did, we should trust him completely and obey and do what he's asked us to do.

he's given us something very specific, two things really in this passage to trust in. First of all, trust his promises.

[30 : 44] Even if they don't seem to be holding true in that moment, God will keep his promises no matter what. Abraham believed that God could do a miracle and raise his son from the dead if he had to, but that he would do whatever it took to keep his promises.

promises. Trust that God will keep his promises. He always does. He always will. And second, trust that God will provide.

Isn't that the main lesson of this story? That's what Abraham came to express before the sacrifice. God will provide the lamb for the sacrifice, my son.

And that's what Abraham expressed after as he named that mountain, that region, the Lord will provide. Perhaps you're going through one of those kinds of situations right now in your life.

If so, I want to say to you with Abraham, lift your head and look to the Lord. He will look after it.

[31 : 57] He will provide. He will see to it what is required in this situation. You can count on him for that.

And if there's any doubt about whether this is just for Abraham or if this is for us too, the Lord has said these similar words again through the apostle Paul in his letter to the church at Rome, what did he say?

He said, and we know that God causes all things to work together for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

how can we be sure that that's for us, that God will really treat us like that? Listen, 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, all things, all things that we need, all things that are good for us.

He's already given us the ultimate and that's the evidence, that's the proof that he will look after us and take care of us, even in those situations where we have no idea how it's going to happen.

[33 : 33] Nothing can separate us from his love. And as Abraham learned that day, not even my own sin, the sacrifice that was required was far costlier than he expected.

But he learned that day that God will provide the lamb that's required. God will look after it. God will look after you and me.

Let's pray. Okay. God will pray. God will pray. God will pray. God will pray. Father in heaven, thank you so much for these words. They come at a needed time for many of us.

It's hard to trust you when what we see happening in our lives, in the lives of friends and family, is so opposite to what we expected.

strengthen our faith in you, Lord. Teach us to live as Abraham did, to walk by faith and not by sight, so that you might receive all the glory.

[34 : 46] In Christ's name, amen.