

Genesis chapter 22 verses 1 to 19

¹ Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. ² Then God said,

"Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about."

³ Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled 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.

⁴ On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. ⁵ 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." 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, ⁷ Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham,

"Father?"

"Yes, my son?" Abraham replied.

"The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

⁸ Abraham answered,

"God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together. ⁹ When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven,

"Abraham! Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied.

¹² "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."

¹³ Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴ So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided."

¹⁵ The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time ¹⁶ and said,

"I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, ¹⁸ and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me." ¹⁹ Then Abraham returned to his servants, and they set off together for Beersheba. And Abraham stayed in Beersheba.

Abraham' story.

Shelem, my friends, let me introduce myself. I am Abraham, formerly known as Abram, son of Terah of Ur. I have served Elohim, the Almighty One, since he called me to leave Haran and my father's family to move to a country where he would lead me. He certainly tested me, because he told me that he would make me a great nation, bless me as an individual and bless all peoples through me. It seemed a strange declaration because I was seventy-five and although married to Sarai, had no child. Nevertheless, I trusted Elohim and set out with my household and nephew, Lot. We faced difficulties and, because she could not see another way for Elohim's words to be accomplished,

Sarai consented for me to have a son with her maidservant, Hagar, so she could perhaps build up a family through her. I could see she was unhappy about such a decision, but then something amazing occurred. After offering hospitality to three strangers, I was told Sarai would give birth: she guffawed, but the Almighty One accomplished this and Sarah, as she became known, bore our precious son, Isaac.

She was so overjoyed, but also jealous that Hagar and her son, Ishmael, should not inherit, she had me send them away. Elohim reassured me that the pair would be kept safe, so I agreed and for several years life was wonderful as we watched Isaac grow into a strong, good-natured youth. I felt all was settled; Elohim's promise would be, could be, fulfilled through Sarah and me. However, life isn't like that and the Almighty One tested me to an unbearable degree: he commanded me to sacrifice my only beloved son as a burnt offering to him. What a demand! I mean, to sacrifice my boy, Isaac. How could I bear to harm him, let alone kill him? What could I tell Sarah if I did? Certainly, she would never forgive me – I could never forgive myself. It would have been easier if he'd told me to sacrifice myself. After all, I was old and would never have another child, but Isaac was young, virile, with potential to produce children and establish a dynasty. No, I thought, I must have misheard Elohim: he wouldn't ask me to end all hope of fulfilling his covenant, would he?

I knew I hadn't misunderstood the Lord, yet, if I obeyed him, a future dynasty was impossible. 'Elohim, please help me!' I groaned in prayer. Almost in answer, I recalled the words of one of the three visitors who told me that Sarah would conceive: 'Is anything too hard for the Lord?' The impossible occurred as the stranger had said, so more in hope than expectation, I took Isaac and some servants to pray to Elohim and make a sacrifice on a mountain.

We travelled three days until we arrived at the mountain the Almighty had directed me to. I told the servants to wait there while Isaac and I sacrificed to Elohim. I told my lovely son to carry the pile of wood, whilst I took the fire and a knife. He was fit and strong, so we climbed up the mountain track together. After a while, Isaac observed that we had the wood, fire and knife for a sacrifice, but there was no lamb for the burnt offering. I was deep in thought, agonising if and how I could kill my son, so it took me a while to answer. I told him the Almighty One would provide a lamb for the burnt offering and that seemed to satisfy my boy.

When we reached the summit, my hands were shaking as though I had the ague, so it took a while to build the altar, even with Isaac's help. When it was done, my son looked around and said,

"I can't see any lamb around here, father."

With a sob, I seized him and bound him with the cord that had held the wood together. Isaac struggled in fear, but amazingly, when I told him that Elohim had commanded me to make Isaac the sacrificial lamb, he ceased struggling and allowed me to lift him onto the altar. I couldn't look him in the eye as he stared at me. I bowed down and cried out,

"Almighty One, I don't understand why you have called me to do this and I am desolate at the prospect of sacrificing my beloved son. Yet you are the Holy One, so may your will be done!" I kissed Isaac, then took up the knife and held it against his throat, but my hand trembled so much I could not cut the vein to let him bleed before I set fire to the wood. I took a deep breath to steady myself, yet before I could draw the knife across his throat, I heard an angel call my name. I looked around and heard the angel say,

"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."

I did not know what to do or say, but the angel added that Elohim declared that because I had been willing to trust him enough that I would have sacrificed my only, beloved son, I would indeed be the founder of a great dynasty that would be a blessing to the whole of humanity.

I heard a rustling nearby and saw a ram trapped by its horns in a thicket, Isaac sobbed,

"Father, Elohim has provided a ram. Let us make our burnt offering together."

At once I cut my boy's bonds. We took the ram, slaughtered it and offered it on the altar, Then Isaac and I fell on our knees, hugged one another and offered our praises to the Holy One. Afterwards, as we descended to our servants, Isaac said the Lord had really been testing me and I had passed the test. He declared that he knew the Lord would not have made me go through with it, but added that we'd better not tell Sarah what had happened. I hugged him and agreed, but it had been a close thing. I was glad my son didn't ask me if would really have sacrificed him, for my answer would have troubled him. I really had put my future in the hands of the Holy One, but he had saved me and my beloved son. I had gone to the very brink for Elohim: what greater example of love could there be? Shelem. Peace and blessings go with you.

Two lessons arise from this reading. Although COVID 19 seems an all-consuming and terrifying threat to our futures, we should trust that God will provide, for nothing is impossible to him. We are blessed with medical staff to use their skills to help the sick, with scientists who are striving to find a way of breaking the chain of infection and we know that our God is a faithful God, for though he tested the faith of Abraham to breaking point, he spared him from killing his beloved son, whereas, in order to save our fallen race, God himself sacrificed his only Beloved Son at Calvary. Abraham would have sacrificed Isaac for love of God, but God **sacrificed** Jesus for love of people, many of whom neither loved nor served him. Abraham asked if there was greater love than he had shown. Almighty God gives us the answer, so trust in his redemptive grace. Amen.