

# Why Did God Tell Abraham to Kill Isaac?

written by Tim Jennings, M.D. | December 18, 2017



Have you ever wondered why God instructed Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac? People who believe that God's law functions no differently than human law—imposed rules that require the government to punish rule breakers—often suggest that this story proves that God requires a legal payment of human blood to pay for our sins.

But those who recognize God as Designer—His laws are the laws upon which reality is built to function—understand that something much more profound was happening in this story, something designed not only to reveal truth to Abraham, but also to help him overcome the sin in his life.

On two occasions, one with Pharaoh and the other with Abimelech, Abraham had the opportunity to trust God with his life. However, on both occasions, Abraham, instead of trusting God, lied and told these powerful rulers that Sarah was his sister rather than his wife.

Why did Abraham lie? Genesis 20:11-13 says,

Abraham replied, "I said to myself, 'There is surely no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.' Besides, she really is my sister, the daughter of my father though not of my mother; and she became my wife. And when God had me wander from my

father's household, I said to her, 'This is how you can show your love to me: Everywhere we go, say of me, "He is my brother." ' ' "

Put simply: Abraham lied because he was afraid.

Why did Adam and Eve run from God after they sinned? Because they were afraid. Fear is part of the infection of sin and is the feeling that results from broken trust. Fear causes selfishness. Fearful, self-centered decision-making is the opposite of love; it leads us to seek to save ourselves, to move away from trusting in God with one's life and from acting in selfless love for others.

All humans are infected with selfishness and, apart from God, will act in self-interest. However, God calls all humans to total healing—to salvation. Those who respond positively to this call are restored to trust, and in that trust, they open their hearts and the Spirit brings them new motivations—love, honesty, and goodness. But even though we now have trust and have hearts that want to do good, old habits and defects of character are not instantly eradicated. Transformation of character occurs in the context of the trust relationship with God, as we choose to apply to our lives what God has revealed is best for us.

This is the only way God can heal the heart of a person and have that person's individuality, identity, and personhood retained. We must actively choose to participate with God. When we trust Him, receive the indwelling Spirit, and then choose to do God's will when we are made aware of it, despite feelings of fear and insecurity, then our brains rewire and our characters become changed. God wants to heal humanity—you and me—from this fear and selfishness.

### **Abraham's Journey**

Abraham was a sinner, just like the rest of us, and he needed the same divine Remedy, so what does Abraham's experience teach us about God's plan to heal and restore?

We see in Abraham our model of faith, but he *became* a model of faith; he was not born as a model of faith. Abraham struggled with the same temptations and failings with which you and I struggle. God led Abraham on a path designed to mature him and instill in him a trusting, god-like character.

God created our minds to work in a particular way; the highest faculties we have are the faculties of reason and conscience, which together comprise our judgment. We also have a will, which is the faculty of choice, and we have feelings—emotions and desires. Jesus said, "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). What faculties of the mind does truth enter? Through our reason and conscience. The Bible also says that our feelings and desires lead us into temptation (James 1:14). Thus, in life, we find ourselves in situations during which God reveals truth to our minds and convicts our consciences of the right course of action. Our judgment then concludes what is best, but our own feelings interfere and tempt us to go in a different direction. Whenever we choose our feelings over our judgment and choose actions that go against our reason and conscience, we damage our characters and mental faculties. If a person persists in such decision-making long enough, the conscience is seared and reason is warped.

We see all of this played out in Abraham's life.

Abraham had feelings of fear that overruled his judgment and, on more than one occasion, he lied to protect himself. This damaged Abraham's character and judgment. Of course, God still loved Abraham and wanted to free him from fear and selfishness, from his weakness of character, and to restore him to righteousness. The only way this could happen was to bring Abraham to points of decision where he had to exercise his will—to choose—to trust God, open his heart to the Spirit, and then choose to do what he knew was right in the face of powerful feelings tempting him to move in the opposite direction. One Bible commentary describes it this way:

God had called Abraham to be the father of the faithful, and his life was to stand as an example of faith to succeeding generations. But his faith had not been perfect. He had shown distrust of God in concealing the fact that Sarah was his wife, and again in his marriage with Hagar. That he might reach the highest standard, God subjected him to another test, the closest which man was ever called to endure. In a vision of the night he was directed to repair to the land of Moriah, and there offer up his son as a burnt offering upon a mountain that should be shown him. [1]

Why did God call Abraham to sacrifice Isaac? For multiple reasons.

**The first reason** was for Abraham's character development. Abraham needed to choose to trust God and overcome his own fear, insecurity, and patterns of seeking to save self.

You fool! Do you want to be shown that faith without actions is useless? How was our ancestor Abraham put right with God? It was through his actions, when he offered his son Isaac on the altar. Can't you see? His faith and his actions worked together; his faith was made perfect through his actions. And the scripture came true that said, "Abraham believed God, and because of his faith God accepted him as righteous." And so Abraham was called God's friend. You see, then, that it is by people's actions that they are put right with God, and not by their faith alone (James 2:20-24 GNT).

We must come to know the truth, but the knowledge of truth is not enough; we must put the truth into action before we are changed by the truth.

If you are sick with pneumonia and the doctor gives you an antibiotic, and you believe the antibiotic will help you (and in truth it will), but you never take the antibiotic, does your belief of the truth without applying it (taking the antibiotic) heal you? Of course not. Likewise, believing the truth without putting it into action doesn't result in healing and transformation in our lives. Why? Because the only way our individuality can be retained and our characters transformed is for each of us to choose to trust God, open our hearts to the Spirit, and *then apply* to our own lives His directions.

Now Abraham twice before lied to save himself; why did God then instruct him to sacrifice his son and not himself? Because Abraham finally cared about something more than his own mortal life. Abraham cared about his son and what his son represented. Isaac represented Abraham's legacy, Abraham's name, Abraham's promise, and Abraham's success. In sacrificing Isaac, Abraham was called to sacrifice

what was more important to him than his own life. Isaac was what mattered most to him. Abraham had to choose: trust God or trust self? This was the only way for selfishness in Abraham to be overcome.

**The second reason** God called Abraham to sacrifice Isaac is found in John 8:56. Jesus said, “Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad” (NIV84).

Abraham longed to know God more intimately, to understand God’s character and plan of salvation, and to comprehend and see the Savior. God instructed Abraham to sacrifice Isaac as a means to fulfill Abraham’s desire of understanding, connecting with, empathizing with, knowing, and moving into greater intimacy with God. It was God’s answer to Abraham’s own request. In the agonizing struggle to sacrifice his son, Abraham identified with and gained insight into the heart of God. One Bible commentary put it this way:

Abraham had greatly desired to see the promised Savior. He offered up the most earnest prayer that before his death he might behold the Messiah. And he saw Christ. A supernatural light was given him, and he acknowledged Christ’s divine character. He saw His day, and was glad. He was given a view of the divine sacrifice for sin. Of this sacrifice he had an illustration in his own experience. The command came to him, “Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, ... and offer him ... for a burnt offering.” Genesis 22:2. Upon the altar of sacrifice he laid the son of promise, the son in whom his hopes were centered. Then as he waited beside the altar with knife upraised to obey God, he heard a voice from heaven saying, “Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from Me.” Genesis. 22:12. This terrible ordeal was imposed upon Abraham that he might see the day of Christ, and realize the great love of God for the world, so great that to raise it from its degradation, He gave His only-begotten Son to a most shameful death. [2]

**The third reason** God called Abraham to sacrifice Isaac was to demonstrate to the intelligent beings in heaven, the sinless angels, that those who trust God are healed and restored—to show that God’s methods work!

The apostle Paul wrote: “I think that God has displayed us, the apostles, last, as men condemned to death; for we have been made a spectacle [theater] to the world, both to angels and to men” (1 Corinthians 4:9 NKJV).

The apostle Peter wrote: “It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things” (1 Peter 1:12 NIV84).

Angels cannot read the secrets of the heart—only God can. If angels could see the secrets of the heart, then a third of them would not have been deceived by Lucifer. Therefore, God must demonstrate that His methods work.

Just as he did in the case of Job, Satan, in heaven before God and the angels, made allegations against Abraham—claiming he had lied and broke trust with God. Therefore, Satan accused, Abraham was not fit to be the father of the faithful, the father of the family through whom the Messiah would come. But God knew Abraham’s heart and that, though Abraham struggled with fear and selfishness, he had come

to trust God. Therefore, God provided this unorthodox intervention to give Abraham the opportunity to choose to trust God under careful observation of the intelligences in heaven, to show them that Abraham was transformed within and that selfishness no longer ruled in his heart.

The book *Patriarchs and Prophets*, page 154, describes it this way:

The sacrifice required of Abraham was not alone for his own good, nor solely for the benefit of succeeding generations; but it was also for the instruction of the sinless intelligences of heaven and of other worlds. The field of the controversy between Christ and Satan—the field on which the plan of redemption is wrought out—is the lesson book of the universe. Because Abraham had shown a lack of faith in God’s promises, Satan had accused him before the angels and before God of having failed to comply with the conditions of the covenant, and as unworthy of its blessings. God desired to prove the loyalty of His servant before all heaven, to demonstrate that nothing less than perfect obedience can be accepted, and to open more fully before them the plan of salvation.

### **One More Reason**

We must also remember that in the instructions for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, God never intended for Abraham to actually kill his son. God already knew what Abraham was willing to do, so while God called Abraham to sacrifice his son for the reasons already stated, he also accomplished one more thing: to demonstrate that human sacrifice is not what God wants, nor will God accept it.

Many pagan cultures in Abraham’s time and throughout history have promoted human sacrifice. God, through Abraham, demonstrated that He does not require, nor accept, human sacrifice as payment. Through the prophet Micah, the Bible states:

With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God (6:6-8).

When we embrace God’s design law, we can read frightening stories like God’s instructions to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac and realize there is much more to them than what we have been led to believe. They are meant to show us that, yes, humans are sick in sin, but that God is the source of goodness, truth, love, and life, and that He is always working to heal and restore all who trust Him.

---

1. *Patriarchs and Prophets*, page 147  
2. *Desire of Ages*, page 468