

Why did God Ask Abraham to Sacrifice His Son?

Kirk Durston

"I find a father holding a knife to his son's throat to show his love to a totalitarian dictator wicked!" was the late atheist Christopher Hitchens' response to the biblical account of God telling Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac. In almost 30 years of participating in formal debates and panels, I have often observed people raise this incident as a reason to not believe in the existence of God. Of course, it does not logically follow that because we do not like what person X asks person Y to do that, therefore, person X does not exist or that Christianity is false. If that were the case, the world's population would be very small indeed.

There is simply no reason to get upset about the story unless it is true. Since some atheists such as Hitchens do get upset about it, one might wonder if there is something about the story that they fear is true. Let us accept that it actually happened and look at the account.

There are four observations.

First, the purpose of the event is stated in the first sentence; God was going to 'test' Abraham. The Hebrew word used here is *nasah*. The idea was that the 'test' would have the effect of changing the person to become closer to what God intended him or her to be.¹ Abraham would not be the same person when it was over. To pass the test, he must change from the state of valuing his son more than God, to the state of having a reverence for God that is above all other things. That kind of reverential fear and awe only comes when one realizes Who and What God is.

Second, God did not stop the test until Abraham took up the knife to kill his son. Why? It was not until that moment that the test truly took place. The decision one way or another had to be made, and the change in Abraham would occur only if he made the right choice. He decided to take up the knife to kill his son and at that moment the decision was made and God stopped him. Abraham was now a different man.

Third, God said, 'Now I know that you fear (stand in awe of) God ... an odd thing for an omniscient Being to say. Omniscience is the ability to know all that is logically possible to know.'² This was not a case of learning a fact that was previously true but unknown to God. Instead, it was a case of a new fact that was previously false but became true at the moment of Abraham's final decision. Abraham, by his decision, had shifted from one state to another.

Fourth, something much bigger had happened. God told Abraham that because of

¹ Exodus 20:20

² W.E. Mann, 'The divine attributes', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, **12**, 2, 1975.

what he had done, he would be greatly blessed, his descendants would be greatly multiplied, and all the nations of the world would be blessed. A small intervention in history by God had subtly changed one man, from that day forward, in how he viewed the world and interacted with other people. Those small changes had consequences that led to the birth of the nation of Israel and the first arrival of Jesus the Messiah, an event which radically changed the future of the world.

It never was God's intention for Abraham to actually sacrifice his son. Rather, what we have in this account is a glimpse into how God orchestrates history with small changes in the past that lead to huge changes in the future. It also is an example of how God gives us hints in the past of what will happen in the future.³ In this case, some 2,000 years later on that same mountain, God Himself, in the person of Jesus the Messiah, took humanity's place on the altar to satisfy the demands of perfect justice, so that He could then carry out the demands of perfect love for every person who will put their trust in Christ for forgiveness of their sins and for eternal life.

³ In Hebrews 11:19 we see that this whole event was a symbolic foreshadowing of a time in the future when Christ would die on that same mountain.