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As you know, most of the Jews don't believe Jesus is the Messiah, so they don't think of the New Testament as the Holy Scripture. On the other hand, some Christians don't like reading the Old Testament because the books of the Hebrew Bible don't talk about Jesus directly.

In addition, God in the Old Testament is described in many places as the fighting, judging, and punishing God, rather than the God of love and compassion highlighted in the New Testament through Jesus Christ. So, many people find it hard to accept some narratives of the Old Testament. Genesis 22:1-14, today's first Bible reading, is one of them.

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The scripture contains the famous story of God's test of Abraham. The narrative is simple. One day God ordered Abraham to sacrifice Isaac as a burnt offering on Mount Moriah to test Abraham's faith.

What's remarkable is Abraham's reaction at that time. As soon as he got God's command, he took action directly to obey God. Verse 3 shows this, “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, they arrived in a place where they could see the mount in the distance. Abraham let his two servants stay there and went up to the top of the mountain together with his son. When they reached the spot for sacrifice, Abraham built an altar, laid Isaac on it, and tried to kill him.

At that time, God stopped Abraham and gave him a ram prepared beforehand for the offering. So, Abraham called that area Jehovah-Jireh, which means “The Lord will provide.” Abraham passed the test, and God said, “Now I know that you fear God, because you haven't withheld from me your son, your only son.”

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The story has a happy ending, but it’s not easy to understand the narrative from today’s perspective. Many people would say, ‘It’s alright that God tests his people, but how can the God of love order to kill a boy for a burnt offering?’ We know that God had prepared a ram before, which means that sacrificing Isaac as a burnt offering wasn’t his intention. Also, according to Leviticus 20, God hated human sacrifice done in the Ancient Near East.

However, there are still many people who don’t like the story; for them God’s test utilising human sacrifice isn’t consistent with the character of the loving God. How then can we interpret today’s story appropriately?

Above all, we need to deculturalise the passage. I mean we need to stop interpreting the narrative from our experiences or perspectives. Considering Abraham’s response and direct obedience, God’s command doesn’t seem to be strange to him. We don’t know the ins and outs of the situation, but there seems to be a cultural consensus between them.

As God has always accommodated himself to human measure and capacity to help human beings know him, we shouldn’t judge God’s ways of communicating with the people some thousand years ago, from today’s cultural viewpoint. If we try to understand the biblical stories with our life-standard, we could easily be stuck on the surface and wouldn’t able to go into more deeply.

I think the story of God’s test to Abraham contains a few important meanings regarding the relationship with God, especially in times of trouble. If we ignore the narrative just because of our feeling or thinking, we could lose some insights into the faith journey that we must learn.

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So, let us put aside the matter of human sacrifice. And then, a new question would arise, “Why did God want to test Abraham at that time?” We can find a clue in verse 1, “Some time later God tested Abraham.” We need to focus on the expression, ‘Some time later.’

According to the previous chapter, Genesis 21, we can read about the treaty made between Abraham and Abimeleck, King of Philistine country. After the treaty, Abraham could stay in peace in the land of the Philistines for a long time.

We don't know how long he had stayed there but can guess that he had assimilated into the culture of Philistine country through actively associating with the people there.

Some time later, God felt like testing Abraham's faith. He might find Abraham's relationship with him had changed or weakened since he had settled down in the foreign land. At that point, God commanded him to sacrifice Isaac, his only son, as a burnt offering.

What's interesting is that in the narrative there are the three places to which we should pay attention regarding Abraham's obedience. The first place is his residential tent in which he heard God's voice and got his command. His tent was his comfort zone, and he could ignore or resist against God's request or make an excuse.

However, he left his comfort zone without hesitation. Early the next morning Abraham left his house with Isaac and two servants and walked for three days until they got to the second place, where he could see Mount Moriah in the distance. Although he set out on his journey to obey, for three days he would be struggling with mixed feelings and thoughts. He could change his mind and go back home, or, he could bring his servants hoping they would convince him not to kill his son.

But he gave up all the possibilities to exit and decided once again to keep going. And then, Abraham started his last journey with his son. How did he feel or what did he think of on the way? We can't begin to imagine not only his feelings or thoughts, but also how he managed such an unbelievable situation.

In the end, Abraham got to the final place, the top of Mount Moriah, where God wanted to sacrifice Isaac. The spot was the place of death and misery for Abraham and his son. Even there, he could run from God but he didn't. As a result, at the place of death, he met Jehovah-Jireh, the God preparing and providing. He would've thought that he was walking through the darkest valley, but found the faith journey was a blessing in disguise.

A long time ago when I was a college student, I read a Christian book named “Daring to live on the Edge.” Loren Cunningham, the author of the book, argues as follows:

Living by faith is not the domain of only those Christians called to ‘full-time’ ministry. Every Christian can enter into the adventure. What is important is not our vocation, but whether we are committed to obeying God's will in our lives. If you are willing to step out in faith and trust in God, doing whatever it is he has asked you to do, then you will see His provision. Once you have experienced this, you will be spoiled for the ordinary.

I believe that the journey of Abraham to Mount Moriah is one of the best examples of how to live on the edge experiencing the adventure of faith.

Sisters and brothers,

We are all called to set out an adventure of faith like Abraham. Where are you now? Some of us would remain in our comfort zone in spite of God’s calling; others would be on the way or would get to the top of Mount Moriah and encounter Jehovah-Jireh.

The bottom line is that if we wouldn’t dare to live on the edge leaving our comfort zone or giving up what we love the most, we might not experience the miracles of “The Lord will provide.” This is what we can learn from today’s story, and this truth is still valid. Amen.