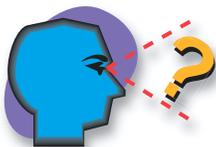




Genesis

Responses to the Questions



NOTE; BE SURE TO ANSWER ALL THE QUESTIONS YOURSELF BEFORE READING THE ANSWERS IN ORDER TO MAKE THE MOST OF THIS STUDY.

A Shocking Command Read Genesis 22:1-8

1. "These things" may refer to the events recorded in the previous two chapters. That would include the episode of Abraham's dishonesty and his weakness for Ishmael, wanting to hold onto him instead of letting him go. Perhaps "these things" are serious enough in his life to require God to examine Abraham's faith. Although he has not repudiated God or forsaken the covenant, is he still willing to walk before God and "be blameless"? (Gen. 17:1) A test should make this clear.

2. Responses will vary. We have no record of how Abraham reacted to this command from God. Did he walk out and take a look at the stars again, seeking some kind of reason to put his trust in God? Think of the objections that may have raced through his head. "You can't possibly mean this! The boy is everything to me. Have I lived with You so long, only to be required to do something worse than giving up my own life? Who are You, anyway? I thought You were better than the gods to whom people sacrifice their children. Has all this 'covenant' talk about descendants and a great nation and blessing the whole world through me just been a hoax? Why are You doing this to me? Is there any way I can change Your mind?"

Abraham could have had an outburst of emotion like this, directed towards God with the intention of negotiating a way out. He could also have decided that by no means was he going to lose another son to the whim of this God. He could have awakened the household, packed up, and fled with the boy. "Forget all Your promises; they don't mean anything to me if I have to lose my son. You've asked too much this time."

Another possibility is that Abraham, shocked by God's command, could have begun a time of serious recollection of his friendship with God up to this point. "I am stunned by what You are asking of me. But during all the years I have lived with You, I have had many experiences of your love, goodness, protection, faithfulness, mercy, and justice. You have asked me to do difficult things before, but no matter how hard they were, You always used them as occasions to bless me and my family. Leaving Haran and my father's house was no picnic, but You were with me every step of the way. Getting circumcised was painful and risky, but Sarah conceived and gave birth at the precise time You promised. But this - offering up my son. I cannot see how anything good can come of it. I'm afraid."

What a long night that must have been.

3. Abraham decided to obey God. He must have gotten to the point of believing that God knows what He is doing, no matter how bad things might look. He trusted God more than he trusted himself, which is the essence of humility (and the opposite of presumption). He must have decided that it was better to let go of Isaac than to disobey God, in spite of the dread he must have felt at what lay ahead. As much as he loved this boy, he must have decided to love God more. He held nothing back.



Responses to the Questions (cont.)

Catholic Scripture Study

A Shocking Command (cont.)

4. "On the third day" is a phrase associated with the Resurrection of Christ and the redemption of the world. In this context, the phrase should alert us to an event which will in some way be a foreshadowing of the Resurrection.
5. The Hebrews reference and Abraham's word to his men about going to worship and returning suggest that Abraham expected God to raise Isaac from the dead after he had killed him. How could he have come to a conclusion like that? Perhaps he reasoned along these lines: "God is asking me to sacrifice my son. I do not understand why, but I know I cannot refuse Him. Whatever God's reasons are, they must be good. Whatever happens, I know I can trust Him to keep His Word to me to give me descendants through this boy. Even if God has to raise Isaac from the dead, I know I will not return from Mt. Moriah alone."
6. Abraham's focus is entirely on God. He does not appear to be thinking sentimental thoughts about Isaac. He does not break down in sobs, crying out, "Don't ask! Just don't ask!" He resolutely anchors everything that is about to happen in the will and action of God. It appears that all the possible jumble of emotions and questions that any normal person would experience in a situation like this have all been reduced to a single conviction: God is in charge here.
7. Abraham prophesies that not only will God provide a lamb for the offering in question (at this point, Abraham probably assumes that Isaac is the lamb) but also that in the future, on that same Mt. Moriah, God will provide a "lamb" for the worship of God by Israel. In Israel, this offering was foreshadowed in the building of the Temple in Jerusalem, on Mt. Moriah; it was fulfilled in the sacrifice of Jesus on Calvary, which was also located on Moriah.

Salvation Through Substitution

Read Genesis 22:9-14

8. Responses will vary. It seems that the slow, detailed account of this episode is meant to give anyone who hears or reads it plenty of time to comprehend what a difficult, radical sacrifice Abraham is offering to God. The pathos of the scene has lots of time to build. Reading it with the benefit of New Testament revelation, we are able to experience its double significance. Not only can we enter into Abraham's mind and heart (as well as Isaac's), but we are also able to look into the heart of God Himself, Who gave up His only beloved Son to a brutal death on our behalf (see Rom. 8:32).
9. When we compare the severity of this test to what seem like minor imperfections in Abraham, we ought to be curious about it. It should make us wonder, "What does God expect from His chosen ones - perfection?" Actually, that is exactly what He desires for them. Why? Because a life of perfection is a life of perfect happiness. God's command to Abraham in Gen. 17:1 to "walk before Me and be blameless" was not simply a requirement. It was a description of how the members of God's family ought to live so that they can know the joy and fulfillment of living in perfect harmony with the end for which they were created, which is to be pleasing in God's sight and blessed by Him.



Responses to the Questions (cont.)

Catholic Scripture Study

Salvation Through Substitution (cont.)

The test that God gives Abraham is so severe that it presumes an advanced level of knowledge and experience of Him. Compare it to the relatively simple test that God first put Abraham through, back in Gen. 12:1-4. There it was simply, "Pack up and go." Here, at least thirty years later, the test is staggeringly difficult. It builds on everything that has gone before in Abraham's life. For Abraham to endure the test, he will have to act on all that he knows about God, and he will have to be willing to mortify even the smallest weaknesses and imperfections yet remaining in his character.

This is what we call "purification." It is the final step in Abraham's life that establishes him as the Father of faith, both for Jews and Gentiles (Rom. 4:11-12). His obedience burned away the dross of even relatively minor imperfections. Interestingly, the test of Abraham gives us a dramatic demonstration of why God tests men in the first place. Men must freely choose to lay down their own wills in order to serve God. When they do this, they are conformed to the likeness of God. They participate in self-donation, which is the essence of the life of the Blessed Trinity. Abraham not only obeys God, but he becomes a living example of the character of God; he is a human being who reflects both the image and likeness of God. As the Catechism says, "As a final stage in the purification of his faith, Abraham, 'who had received the promises,' is asked to sacrifice the son God had given him...And so the father of believers is conformed to the likeness of the Father who will not spare his own Son, but will deliver him up for us all." (2572)

10. The reference in John is a wonderfully mysterious allusion to that dramatic moment on Mt. Moriah, when the angel stayed Abraham's hand from sacrificing his son. When he lifted his eyes, was he able to "see" the day when God would provide the perfect sacrifice, His own dear Son, for men to offer in worship of Him? Was it a mystical vision of future glory that he "saw"? The words of Jesus point in that direction. Mystics in the history of the Church have spoken of episodes like this in terms of a "transforming union" with God. It is an experience of union with Him so complete that it establishes one in the life of perfection, producing the fullness of joy mentioned by Jesus. Perhaps that is what happened to Abraham on Moriah.

God Swears an Oath

Read Genesis 22:15-24

11. God's test of Abraham appears to be a real test. In vs. 12, the angel of the Lord says, "for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son." It seems that it would have been possible for Abraham to decide not to sacrifice Isaac. His choice to obey is truly his own choice. It is his response of faith in the goodness of God, even though the circumstances strongly suggested otherwise.

When God swears an oath to fulfill all His promises to Abraham ("I will indeed bless you") in vss. 15-17, He does so "because" Abraham has obeyed. This final test is a crucial part of God's willingness to swear by Himself to keep the covenant. Once God swears an oath, nothing can revoke it. Far from being a "done deal" in Genesis 15, when God reckoned righteousness to Abraham for his faith, the promise of universal blessing only becomes permanent and irrevocable when Abraham demonstrates that after so many years, he is still willing to live by faith.



Responses to the Questions (cont.)

Catholic Scripture Study

God Swears an Oath (cont.)

12. According to the New Testament, justification is something that happened more than once in Abraham's life. There is no other conclusion that will satisfy the biblical data. This fact presents serious difficulties for many non-Catholic Christian explanations of how justification works. Indeed, at the time of the Reformation, it was such a major obstacle to Martin Luther's doctrine of salvation by faith alone that he refused to consider the epistle of James to be inspired Scripture. Modern day non-Catholic Christians never go that far, but when they hold Luther's doctrine, they are forced to produce interpretations of James that simply do not address what the words actually say and mean.

The Church teaches that justification is a process, not a one-time act. "In Catholic theology, justification is not a one-time act of God. Although for New Testament believers, justification begins at a specific point in time, i.e., baptism, justification continues as a process throughout the individual's life. God gives his grace to the individual at baptism, but He also gives grace continually throughout the course of life. A person gains grace as he lives out his Christian life in obedience. As grace increases, justification increases, and the individual becomes more and more righteous in the eyes of God. If God removes justifying grace from the individual, then justification ceases. This occurs when the individual commits serious sin. When God restores grace, he restores justification...In the final analysis, if the justifying grace begun at baptism is not present at the end of a person's life, then he will remain unjustified and be condemned for eternity." (Not By Faith Alone, by Robert Sungenis; Santa Barbara, CA: Queenship Publishing Co., 1997; p.222-223)

13. Responses will vary. The simplest answer a Catholic can give to this question is, "I am being saved." We know with confidence that God will not fail us. In addition, we can count on His grace to help us in the tests He sends us. But we want to avoid the presumption that assumes that our salvation is a "done deal." We want always to acknowledge our own responsibility to respond to and cooperate with the grace God gives us to obey Him. This is the kind of humility that will keep us vigilant to resist sin, out of a proper fear of the Lord. The final reward of heaven remains in God's hands alone. Our job is to live by faith throughout our lives, as Abraham did, always ready for the test.

The Death of Sarah Read Genesis 23:1-20

14. The passage in Hebrews suggests that Abraham describes himself as a "stranger and sojourner" not because he has left his home in Haran (vs. 15) but because he has set his heart and mind on a heavenly home, a "better country." This is a profound statement, because it suggests that Abraham's encounter with God on Mt. Moriah has given his life a completely new perspective. He understands that his true homeland is where God is, in the city that "He has prepared for them" (vs. 16). People who have this orientation are pleasing to God, and He is "not ashamed to be called their God."

To be able to think this way demonstrates a thorough detachment from this world and a complete focus on life with God. That, of course, is the reason for the tests God sends into our lives. Although the test God gave Abraham was incredibly difficult, as soon as he set out on the road with Isaac, his transformation began. When it was complete, all that really mattered to him was beholding the face of God - the beatific vision. The suffering has turned to glory.