

In catechism class, the students often memorize the Ten Commandments and Martin Luther’s explanations. The easiest one to memorize is the First commandment. It goes like this: **“You shall have no other gods. What does this mean? We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.”** That’s by far the easiest one to memorize. The other commandments and explanations have more words and they are more complicated. The first commandment is the easiest one to memorize, but it’s actually the hardest one to do.

Abraham was given a test on the first commandment. But Abraham was not asked to write down on sheet of paper the words **“You shall have no other gods”** What does this mean: **“We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.”** Instead Abraham was put into a real-life situation in which his fear, love, and trust in God were all put to the test.

Our passage says, **Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” “Here I am,” he replied. Then God said, “Take your son, your only son, whom you love – Isaac – and go to region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on the mountain I will show you.” (Genesis 22:1-2)** Doesn’t this command seem to contradict everything we now about God? God is morally perfect. And yet he tells Abraham to do something which he says in other parts of the Bible is morally terrible. In the book of Deuteronomy God says, **“Let no one be found among you who sacrifices their son or daughter in the fire ... Anyone who does [this] is detestable to the LORD” (Deuteronomy 18:10, 12).**

But if child sacrifice is detestable to the LORD then why does he tell Abraham to do it here? In the end the LORD stops Abraham from doing it, but then why did he command Abraham to do it in the first place? Some people can design a question that gets right to the heart of things. God gave a command that got right to Abraham’s heart. Abraham’s response to this command would show whether he feared, loved, and trusted in God above all things.

Did Abraham *fear* God above all things? When the Angel of the LORD stops Abraham, the Angel says, **“Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son” (Gen 22:12).** The biblical concept of fearing God is a multi-layered concept. It has many aspects to it. It means to have a great reverence and awe for God. But another aspect of fearing God is brought out by this passage. It says, **“Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son” (Gen 22:12).** Part of fearing God means recognizing that everything in my life actually belongs to him. Abraham feared God above all things.

Did Abraham *love* God above all things? God really draws out the description of Isaac for maximum effect. **“Take your son, your only son, whom you love – Isaac” (Genesis 22:2).** Abraham genuinely loved Isaac. I’m a parent and I certainly love my children. It’s good that parents love their children. But can it ever happen that a parent’s love for their children eclipses their love for God? Yeah that can happen. What test would bring that out? Maybe if we spend lavishly on our children, but we are very tight with what we give to the LORD. Maybe if we’re too scared to tell our children that what they are doing is wrong. We value our children a great deal and that’s a good thing. But we do need to remember that to love our children more than God is a sin against the 1st commandment. Abraham loved Isaac, but he loved God more.

Did Abraham *trust in* God above all things? Abraham in the Bible is the man of faith. God makes promises to Abraham and Abraham believes those promises. Now Abraham’s faith was really tested. You see God had told Abraham that he had a grand plan for Abraham. God told Abraham, **“I’m going make you into a great nation.”** He had told Abraham, **“Count the stars. That’s how many descendants you are going to have.”** And he told Abraham, **“In your offspring all the nations of the world will be blessed.”** And that means that the promised Savior was going to come from Abraham’s family.

And God had told Abraham that this was all going to happen through Isaac. God would make Abraham a great nation through Isaac. God would give Abraham many descendants, through Isaac. The line of the Savior was going to run through Isaac. This whole grand plan of God was going to run through Isaac. And now God told Abraham to kill Isaac.

It’s kind of like when you’re watching a movie and you know that the hero is not going to die. Abraham believed that because of God’s promises, in the end, Isaac was not going to end up dead. 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” (Genesis 22:5).** The

book of Hebrews tells us what Abraham was thinking. **“Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death” (Hebrews 11:19)**. What faith in the power of God! What faith in the promises of God!

Now Abraham didn't know exactly how it was going to work out. And so when Isaac asks him, **“Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” (22:7)** Abraham says, **“God himself will provide the lamb, my son” (22:8)**. Have you ever felt that way before? Have you ever said to yourself, “I'm not sure exactly how this is going to work out, but I know the LORD will provide”?

Abraham feared, loved and trusted in God above all things. Now I don't mean to say that Abraham was sinless. If you read the rest of the stories about Abraham in the book of Genesis, you can find times when Abraham sinned. But one commentator said that this story shows what God-given faith can do.¹

It also shows how God rewards God-given faith.² God says to Abraham, **“I swear by myself ... that because you have done this and have not withheld from me your son, your only son. 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 your enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed because you have obeyed me” (Genesis 22:16-18)**. Luther says in his Small Catechism that God promises grace and every blessing to all who keep these commandments.

In your life, you will face 1st commandment tests. It won't be as severe as Abraham's but it will be fitted right for you. When you face those tests, this story can help. This story can help by showing you what God-given faith can do. It can encourage you by showing you that God-given faith is rewarded. And it can strengthen you by pointing you to what God-given faith holds on to.

God has an only Son whom he loves. And he did not spare his only Son but gave him up for us all (Romans 8:32).³ God provided a substitute to be sacrificed in place of Isaac. God also provided a substitute to die instead of you and me.

What greater reason to stand in awe of him than that he did that for us? What greater reason to love him than that he loved us? What greater reason to trust him than that he saved us? We have every reason to fear, love and trust. Amen.

¹ Werner Franzmann, *Bible History Commentary: Old Testament*, (Milwaukee: WELS Board for Parish Education, 1980), 130.

² I owe this thought to *Luther's Catechism*, question 106.

³ I owe this insight to Henry Morris, *The Genesis Record* (Grand Rapids: Baker and Creation-Life: San Diego, 1976), 374-376; and a sermon by Tim Keller.