

Raise your hand if you consider yourself a Marvel movie fan (if you're with us online you can virtually raise your hand in the chat). Now I admit that superhero movies aren't really my thing. But it's impossible to deny that Marvel is one of the most successful cinematic franchises of all time, with billions upon billions in sales.

Their marketing strategy, which was launched in 2008, has been nothing short of brilliant. They've introduced an expanding array of characters through a series of phased movie releases, each phase building on the last, with the stories of Marvel's heroes often intersecting with each other in ways that keep fans coming back for more and more and more.

Indeed, more Marvel movies are expected this year, including next installments for *Thor* and *Black Panther*.

But the success of the Marvel Cinematic Universe has deeper roots than its recent marketing campaigns. Back in 1960, when legendary comic writer Stan Lee took the helm of Marvel Comics, he developed characters who, apart from their superpowers, were pretty much regular, everyday people like you and me. They had ordinary human lives and ordinary human problems. Some had character flaws and personal shortcomings. Nonetheless, each of them was called upon to rise to the occasion in the face of crisis.

So it's really the *human relatability* of Marvel's superheroes, as much as their powers, that's made them so popular with audiences.

Because of this, Marvel comics and movies can get us wondering about ourselves. When you and I— in all our human ordinariness and shortcomings— are faced with a crisis, how will we respond? Will *we* rise to the occasion?

Unlike Marvel heroes, you and I don't have superhuman abilities. But then again, as followers of Jesus, we do have access to the supernatural power of God—the same power that according to scripture raised Jesus from the dead.¹ So perhaps you and I have more heroic potential than we realize.

Did you know that the Bible features its own universe of heroes, as it were— faith heroes? You'll find a long list of them in Hebrews chapter 11, often referred to as the "Faith Hall of Fame."

¹ See Romans 8:11; Ephesians 1:19-21.

And not unlike Marvel heroes, these biblical heroes of faith were all pretty much regular, fallible folks like you and me. This is perhaps best captured in what the Bible says in James 5 about a particular biblical hero of faith:

Elijah was a human being, even as we are... ²

This is the same Elijah—that great Old Testament prophet—who mediated miraculous displays of God’s power, and whose faith in God held firm in the face of incredible odds.

This verse is meant to remind us that the faith heroes we read about in scripture aren’t considered heroes because they had superpowers, were morally perfect, or were especially qualified or talented. Rather, they’re considered faith heroes because they put their trust in God—*especially in the face of crisis*—and opened their lives to the flow of God’s grace and power to work in, through and for them.

Do you know what this means? It means that the field of becoming a faith hero is open to all of us—to you and to me, even.

Keep that in mind as we begin a new series today called *Faith Heroes: Lessons to Help You Face a Crisis*. In the weeks ahead, we’re going to look at six Old Testament faith heroes and discover lessons from their stories that can help us face the crises we encounter in our own life and times.

Because how many of you know that we’re living in times of heightened crisis—on a global and societal level, on the church level, and for so many of us, on a personal level as well?

Our prayer is that you will put into practice the lessons we learn in this series from Abraham, Moses, David, Elijah, Ruth and Esther, so that you may personally and increasingly experience God’s grace to strengthen and empower, to deliver and overcome, to comfort and redeem—even and especially in the face of crisis.

We kick off our series now with a story from the life of Abraham, in Genesis chapter 22.

God had originally called Abraham in Genesis chapter 12. He was known as Abram at the time, and God promised to launch his plan to rescue a fallen world through Abraham’s descendants. They would eventually become a great nation, through which God would bless all nations. ³

Except there was a problem: Abraham was childless, and his wife Sarah was barren—unable to conceive children. Nonetheless, God kept reaffirming his promise that one day—

² James 5:17a (NIV)

³ See Genesis 12:1-3.

in their old age, even— Abraham and Sarah would have a son. And God was true to his promise. After decades of waiting, Isaac was finally born.

But the long wait for Isaac wasn't the greatest crisis Abraham faced. It wasn't his greatest test. His greatest test would come in Genesis chapter 22. Please follow along as I read:

Some time later, God tested Abraham's faith. "Abraham!" God called.

"Yes," he replied. "Here I am."

"Take your son, your only son—yes, Isaac, whom you love so much—and go to the land of Moriah. Go and sacrifice him as a burnt offering on one of the mountains, which I will show you."

The next morning Abraham got up early. He saddled his donkey and took two of his servants with him, along with his son, Isaac. Then he chopped wood for a fire for a burnt offering and set out for the place God had told him about. On the third day of their journey, Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. "Stay here with the donkey," Abraham told the servants. "The boy and I will travel a little farther. We will worship there, and then we will come right back."

So Abraham placed the wood for the burnt offering on Isaac's shoulders, while he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them walked on together, Isaac turned to Abraham and said, "Father?"

"Yes, my son?" Abraham replied.

"We have the fire and the wood," the boy said, "but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?"

"God will provide a sheep for the burnt offering, my son," Abraham answered. And they both walked on together.

When they arrived at the place where God had told him to go, Abraham built an altar and arranged the wood on it. Then he tied his son, Isaac, and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. And Abraham picked up the knife to kill his son as a sacrifice. At that moment the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!"

"Yes," Abraham replied. "Here I am!"

“Don’t lay a hand on the boy!” the angel said. “Do not hurt him in any way, for now I know that you truly fear God. You have not withheld from me even your son, your only son.”

Then Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught by its horns in a thicket. So he took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering in place of his son. Abraham named the place Yahweh-Yireh (which means “the Lord will provide”). To this day, people still use that name as a proverb: “On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided.”

Then the angel of the Lord called again to Abraham from heaven. “This is what the Lord says: Because you have obeyed me and have not withheld even your son, your only son, I swear by my own name that I will certainly bless you. I will multiply your descendants beyond number, like the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will conquer the cities of their enemies. And through your descendants all the nations of the earth will be blessed—all because you have obeyed me.”⁴

As you might imagine, this passage raises all kinds of questions and issues that Bible scholars and everyday Christians have wrestled with for hundreds of years. While today we can only begin to touch on some of those questions and issues, we can nevertheless learn three essential lessons in this story that can help us in our own times of testing and crisis.

After we look at these lessons, I’ll then share a story about how I’m applying those lessons in my own life these days.

The first lesson from Abraham that can help you face a crisis is to:

1. **Get to know God personally.**

What’s your history with God? How long have you been walking with him? What’s his track record in your life? What’s been your experience of his character? How well would you say you know God? I don’t just mean know *about* him. I mean really *knowing* him— personally, relationally, experientially?

Abraham knew God well. You see, the story we just read in Genesis 22 wasn’t his first experience with God. He had already been walking with God for a few decades. God had revealed himself to Abraham many times through his success and failures, triumphs and trials, promises and provisions.

Though it all, Abraham had come to know God and his character.

⁴ Genesis 22:1-18 (NIV)

One example of a time when Abraham got to know God better was when he was pleading with God to spare the wicked city of Sodom from judgment. Genesis 18 tells us,

Then Abraham approached him and said: “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?

The Lord said, “If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.”⁵

Abraham continues to negotiate with God, talking God down to forty-five, to forty, to thirty, to twenty.

Then he said, “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?”

He answered, “For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it.”

When the Lord had finished speaking with Abraham, he left, and Abraham returned home.⁶

Why did Abraham return home at this point? Why didn't he talk God all the way down to sparing the city for just one righteous person? It seems that in the process of his interaction with God, Abraham's question about whether the judge of all the earth would do right became settled in his mind and heart once and for all. He came to the realization that God could always be counted upon to do what was just.

Above and beyond this, Abraham had seen God be absolutely true to his promise to grant him and Sarah a child in spite of seemingly impossible circumstances.

And so, through years of experience with God, Abraham had come to a place of deepest conviction that God was good, that God was able, and that God could be trusted— no matter what.

This conviction shines through when Abraham is tested in Genesis 22, because it seems that he doesn't believe Isaac will actually die. It seems that Abraham knows the character of God well enough to believe that God wouldn't have him follow through with the sacrifice of

⁵ Genesis 18:23-26 (NIV)

⁶ Genesis 18:32-33 (NIV)

his son. We see this in verse 5, where Abraham confidently tells his servants that both he *and Isaac* would return after offering the sacrifice:

“Stay here with the donkey... The boy and I will travel a little farther. We will worship there, and then *we* will come right back.”⁷

We especially see Abraham’s trust in God in his statement in verse 8. Isaac had asked him why they didn’t have a sheep for the burnt offering.

“God will provide a sheep for the burnt offering, my son,” Abraham answered.⁸

So even though Abraham was prepared to do what God had asked, it seems he was expecting something else to happen. In the New Testament, the writer of Hebrews affirms this, saying:

By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.” Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.⁹

Abraham was convinced that God would somehow work out all the details, and when God did just that, Abraham named the place accordingly— *Yahweh Yireh*—meaning, *the Lord will provide*.

The point is that Abraham came to trust in God’s provision in the face of this extreme crisis because he had experienced God’s provision in so many ways throughout his life. Because he had walked with God, he had come to know God—to really *know* him— and was deeply convinced that God was good, was able, and could be trusted— no matter what.

And so, the first lesson we learn from Abraham in this passage is that we too need to get to know God. We too need to walk with him—to cultivate our relationship with him— because only by doing so do we open our lives to the experience of his goodness, his faithfulness and provision. Only by getting to know God will you be able to trust and obey him when you face a crisis.

It’s okay to start where you are. I mean, where else can you start, right?

⁷ Genesis 22:5 (NIV)

⁸ Genesis 22:8a (NIV)

⁹ Hebrews 11:17-19 (NIV)

Maybe you've walked with God for a long time, and you can lean into his track record of faithfulness in your life when you face your next crisis. That's an incredible gift; an incredible blessing.

Maybe you've been a believer for a long time, but your relationship with God isn't all that close. Or perhaps you're a newer Christian and haven't walked with God all that much yet. Or maybe you haven't even begin walking with God at all.

Wherever you find yourself, can you hear God calling you to get to know him better?

At Cornerstone, we have tools to help you grow deeper your relationship with God. I encourage you to check out the QR code you see on the screen:

www.cornerstonechurch.ca/embody. It will take you to a webpage that includes dozens of resources to help you get to know God better.

And if I may highlight one particular resource from that page, it would be our **Practical Guide Sheet for Bible Intake**. It offers a range of super-practical tips for helping you get to know God through the scriptures. You can download the guide sheet using the QR code you see on the screen (www.cornerstonechurch.ca/bibleintake), and we also have a limited number of printed copies available on the literature racks in the lobby and near the back entrance. Feel free to help yourself to one of those if you're here in person.

Moving on, let's look at a second lesson from Abraham that can help us face a crisis.

2. Choose God over outcomes.

At this point, let me say a word about the whole notion of child sacrifice that comes up in this passage, because it trips people up sometimes.

It's important to understand that Abraham lived in ancient times when many pagans believed that their so-called "gods" commanded the sacrifice of firstborn children. So God's request to sacrifice Isaac may not have come across to Abraham as the horrendous shock that it does to us.

And clearly, God does not intend for Isaac to be sacrificed. As we've seen, Abraham seems very confident of this, based on his personal knowledge God and his character. He knows that the judge of all the earth will always do what is right.

We also know that later in the Old Testament, when God's people fell into idolatry, and tragically began to practice child sacrifice themselves, this is what God had to say about it:

They have built the high places of Baal to burn their children in the fire as offerings to Baal—something I did not command or mention, *nor did it enter my mind*.¹⁰

Far be it from God to endorse such a horrific and evil practice. It's just not in his character to do such a thing. So one reason God tests Abraham in Genesis 22 to reveal what Abraham really believes about God's character.

But more than that, the test was also meant to reveal whether Abraham loved God himself more than he loved the blessings and benefits—the outcomes— God had promised him. At the end of the day, what really had Abraham's heart—the gifts or the giver?

Accordingly, this passage is meant to get you asking a similar question about yourself: *What is the motivating factor in my relationship with God?* Is it God himself, or is it some outcome that I'm hoping God will make happen? Is God just a means to some other end that I desire, or is God himself my ultimate thing, my all in all?

God commends Abraham in verse 12, saying:

“Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”¹¹

At the end of the day, we see that it wasn't the sacrifice of Isaac that God wanted. It was Abraham's heart. And the passage shows that Abraham's heart belonged to God indeed, above all else. Knowing this, God then reaffirms all his covenant promises to Abraham:

“I swear by myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld 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 their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.”¹²

Does God have your heart, today? You see, we all hope for certain outcomes in life—whether it's financial security, academic and professional achievements, good health; a certain hoped-for vision we have for our marriage, kids or even for our church involvement. If you didn't get the outcomes you're hoping for, would you still choose God?

What are you carrying that you find difficult to give up to God? What is God calling you to surrender? When push comes to shove, will you choose God himself over outcomes?

¹⁰ Jeremiah 19:5 (NIV), emphasis added.

¹¹ Genesis 22:12b (NIV)

¹² Genesis 22:16-18 (NIV)

That leads to another very important question: *What would actually motivate your heart to choose God over outcomes?* This is where our third lesson comes in.

3. Fix your eyes on Jesus.

Because above all else, that's what this passage is calling us to do.

The Bible is a unified story that points to Jesus. The Bible always points to Jesus.

Along these lines, Andy Patton of the Bible Project explains that Genesis 22 functions as a form of biblical literature called *prophetic reenactment*.¹³

Throughout the Bible, God asked his prophets to reenact in miniature things that God was doing on a larger scale. For example, Hosea was called to marry a prostitute as a way of illustrating how God remained faithful to his people even though they had been terribly unfaithful to him.¹⁴ God instructed the prophet Ezekiel to lie on his side for over a year to symbolize the siege of Jerusalem.¹⁵

Genesis 22 is a prophetic reenactment in which Abraham and Isaac point beyond themselves. The story points to the greater redemption God would one day accomplish through one of their descendants—*Jesus*.

If Genesis 22 is like a lock, then Jesus is the key that opens it. Check it out:

- Both Isaac and Jesus are “beloved sons” who have been long-awaited and are born in miraculous circumstances (Genesis 22:1; Matthew. 3:17).
- In both cases, the father leads the son, and the son follows obediently toward his own death (Genesis 22:3; Mt. 26:39).
- Both sons carry the wood that is to be the instrument of their deaths on their backs (Genesis 22:6; John 19:17).
- God provides the sacrifice, which Abraham says will be a lamb, and Jesus is called, “the lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.” (Genesis 22:8; John 1:29).
- An *exchange* happens in Genesis 22, the ram in place of Isaac. This points to the greater exchange that happens at the cross, where Jesus, the Son of God, dies in our place. God can now spare humanity, because in the person of his Son, he has taken our death upon himself, so that we might have eternal life.
- If Isaac represents Jesus in the story, then Abraham represents God the Father. The apostle Paul had Genesis 22 in mind when he wrote:

¹³ See <https://bibleproject.com/blog/why-did-god-ask-abraham-to-sacrifice-isaac/>.

¹⁴ See Hosea 1.

¹⁵ See Ezekiel 4.

He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? ¹⁶

And a few verses later, on the grounds of this sacrifice, Paul pronounces one of the strongest messages of hope and consolation in all scripture:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

“For your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. ¹⁷

What will motivate your heart to choose God over outcomes? And what will motivate your heart to really get to know God? What will motivate you is God’s sacrificial love for you in Jesus. Indeed, his love is truest thing about you.

Why? Because come what may, nothing can ever separate you from his love. Everything else can change. But his love for you never changes. Everything else can be lost. But you can never lose his love for you. Therefore God’s self-giving love for you in Jesus the truest thing about you.

And so, it is God’s love for you in Jesus that can enable you to face any crisis—even death itself—and come out on the other side more than a conqueror.

Therefore, when you face a crisis—maybe you’re even facing a crisis now—what do you do above all else?

You fix your eyes on Jesus, to whom our passage points. You fix your eyes on Jesus, who is the ultimate revelation of God’s love for you. You fix your eyes on Jesus whose love for you is infinitely stronger than any crisis you will ever face. You fix your eyes on Jesus, from whose love you can never, ever be separated.

Today we’ve seen three lessons from Abraham in Genesis 22 that can help you face a crisis: *Get to know God. Choose God over outcomes. And fix your eyes on Jesus.*

¹⁶ Romans 8:31-32 (NIV)

¹⁷ Romans 8:35-39 (NIV)

Earlier, I said that I'd conclude with a story about how I'm applying these lessons in my own life these days.

Many of you know that Jan's and my daughter, Nicole, has been grappling with some besetting health difficulties for several years now, and I share this with her permission. She's been diagnosed with a few hard-to-treat conditions, at least one of which continues to stand in the way of her ability to move forward with what she wants to do in life.

This is our crisis, and it's been so, so hard—for her especially, but also for us as her parents—very much so. She's only 22, and wants to be able to get on with her life. Because God has given her hopes and dreams—in particular, a dream to become a special education teacher. I mean, you should see her in action with special needs kids. If you could, you'd just know God's hand was on her for such a calling.

So I'll speak for myself now, and talk about how I'm applying the lessons from today's message in facing this long and difficult crisis.

First of all, I continue to **get to know God** by walking with him daily through scripture and various forms of prayer. I don't do so perfectly or faultlessly, but I do so consistently and authentically. It's something I've been doing for many years, and it's helped me get to know God over the years. In coming to him each day, I speak to God about the crisis and my honest feelings about it. In doing so, I find sustaining grace and renewed hope in his presence, regardless of circumstances. Often, I find that the Lord will have a particular word of life for me—it might be through scripture, creation, or the inner witness of the Holy Spirit—and those words of life from God have sustained and carried me in the face of this and many other crises in my life in more ways that I can begin to recount.

As well, part of getting to know God involves the experiences I've had of his answered prayers over the years, and how he's always provided and tended to the details—maybe not in the way I would have predicted or chosen—but always faithfully, and often in ways that have far exceeded my hopes and expectations. There was one previous situation with Nicole's health where God's answer to prayer was nothing short of astounding. And so I hang onto experiences like that when I face the current crisis with her health. By walking with God and getting to know him, I've been able, along with my family, to personally see and experience what God can do, and how he is good, he is able, and can be trusted—come what may.

Second, I seek to **choose God over outcomes** in the face of this crisis. Does that mean I don't pray for certain outcomes? Of course not. I pray for Nicole's healing and treatment and for God to give her the health and strength she needs to move forward in life every single day. But through it all, God shows me that what I need, and what we need, above and beyond any outcome, is God himself. It's not just about the gifts he can give. It's about

making the Giver my ultimate thing, because as the psalmist says, his love is better than life itself. ¹⁸

And what motives me to choose God above outcomes, is Jesus. When I **look to Jesus**, I am reminded that:

He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? ¹⁹

Jesus is the assurance that God is working for my good—and for Nicole’s good—in all things—even in and through this health crisis. ²⁰ Jesus is the assurance that whatever the enemy intends for harm, God will work for good in her life, and in our lives, such that this health crisis will become the servant of our greater growth and joy and fruitfulness in the Lord, much more so than if it had never happened in the first place.

So that, in a nutshell, is my story about how these lessons from Abraham are helping me to face a crisis. As you’ve listened today, how is God speaking to you? How is God calling you to put these lessons to practice in your own life? Allow me to close by praying for you...

¹⁸ See Psalm 63:3

¹⁹ See again Romans 8:31-32 (NIV)

²⁰ See Romans 8:28