

## What to Give Up for Lent?

Did you give something up for Lent? Every Fat Tuesday, the day people binge on things before Lent starts, there's all kinds of chatter about what to give up for Lent. I ran across a list of 25 suggestions people might give up for Lent. Most of them are in a sense, trivial or luxury items, things that are not really essential or even good for our well-being anyway, like chocolate or soda, chewing gum or coffee—well maybe you'd beg to differ about coffee being non-essential. Often, people make it about as long as their New Year's resolutions before they give up on whatever they decided to give up for Lent, and then go and down a tub of ice cream.

Whether any of these specific things to "give up" have any real value depends on what is going on in a person's heart. If it's just an outward show to flaunt, well then it's only doing more harm than good. If the discomfort or sacrifice serves as a heartfelt and private reminder of our Lenten journey to the cross, then it may serve a good purpose. But let's get down to business, past the trite and trivial surface things, and realize that God constantly calls us to give up anything that would stand in his place, that would occupy the throne in our hearts.

The First Commandment, "You shall have no other gods!" lasts a little longer than just the 40 days of Lent and the list of idols that might occupy our hearts is more than 25 things long. Sometimes they're an obvious sin, but sometimes they can hide beneath the surface. If you want to find your idol, one Christian author says, "Trace your most unyielding emotions. Anger, despair, anxiety... These emotions are like smoke from the fire of the altar of the god that you're worshipping."<sup>1</sup> It may be something that we constantly struggle with—a craving for attention and approval that leaves us always empty, or the anger that we feel at what God has allowed to happen to us. It might be a good old-fashioned idol like Baal, not some pagan statue, but the god of sex and lust that prances across screens everywhere and prances his way into your heart and mind.

Whatever the idol, the bottom line is this. Giving up sinful idols is not a negotiable thing we may or may not decide to do. It's a given part of the Christian life 365 days a year. But sometimes idols may not even be things that are sinful in themselves. They may be good gifts of God that have ceased to be good because they have taken God's place. Money is a perfectly good gift of God, but the love of money is the root of all evil. How easily it can climb upon the throne in our hearts. What about this one? Relaxation, quality time with the family—certainly a good thing no doubt! Until the getaway trips to the cabin or the cozy sleep-in mornings chip away at our first priority to spend focused and quality time worshiping as a family.

The story we've got today is about a family, an aged father and his only beloved Son. This particular father is a very important father in the history of the Bible—Father Abraham. Abraham and his wife Sarah had been childless long past the age of childbearing for Sarah. But God promised them a son, through whose line all the nations of the earth will be blessed. 25 years pass from the time of the first promise, during which Abraham successfully proves that he is a lying, contriving sinner just like everyone of us. Then the time comes when the promise is finally miraculously fulfilled by God when Abraham is 100 years old and Sarah is 90.

What those parents wouldn't have done to protect this, their only child, granted to them in old age, and even more, the bearer of the Savior's line! They likely invented helicopter parenting 4000 years before the helicopter! This child, so long awaited and dearly loved, might

---

<sup>1</sup> Matt Papa, *Look and Live*. p 69. Bethany House Publishers, Minneapolis.

be just the little tyke who could crawl up onto God’s throne in their hearts—a good thing becoming a “god thing”<sup>2</sup> So God comes with a test, an opportunity for Abraham to show his love for God above all things, even his son.

**“Abraham, take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.” (Genesis 22:2)** Martin Luther comments that to Abraham, how it would have seemed that, **“this command must be of the devil and not of God.”** For one thing, what kind of monster would force a father to violate his love and kill his own son? Not to mention that sacrificing Isaac would do away with the promised line of the Savior!

It appeared to make no sense, but God’s command was clear, and Abraham demonstrated extraordinary trust in it. **“Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac.” (Genesis 22:3).** Abraham doesn’t allow anyone or anything to convince him otherwise, as he sets out straightaway to do what the Lord commanded. As they approach the place, Abraham instructs the 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)**

It’s not that Abraham forgot what he was going there to do, but he trusted that whatever was going to happen, God was not going to break his promise that his offspring would come through Isaac. Imagine the mental anguish of this test as Abraham takes the wood and places it on his beloved son to carry it to his own sacrifice. At this point, Isaac starts to get curious. “Dad, we’ve got everything else but where’s the lamb for the burnt offering? Did you forget the lamb?”

How he was able to keep from bursting into tears, I’m not sure, but Abraham responds again in faith, **“God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” (Genesis 22:8).** And the two went on, the lamb going uncomplaining forth unknowingly carrying the wood for his own sacrifice. Isaac displays great trust in all this as well as his father is acting so strange!

Finally, they reach the particular mountain in Moriah that God had specified. Abraham builds the altar and, taking the wood off his son’s back, he lays it out. Then he turns to his son, Isaac now realizing. He binds him and lays him on top. **“Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.” (Genesis 22:11).** It was clear! Only one was reigning on the throne in Abraham’s heart. To both him and to God, it was as good as done! The test was complete. Abraham had sacrificed everything that might stand in the place of God. And at that moment, **“The angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, ‘Abraham, Abraham, don’t lay a hand on the boy. Don’t do anything to him.’ ‘Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.’”**

It’s important to realize something right there. God already knew in advance what Abraham was going to do. The real point of the test was for Abraham himself to see what he was going to do, and be strengthened in knowing God had his proper place in his heart. This test of faith was for Abraham’s good, and through faith in the promise of God, Abraham was able to conquer the test. Hebrews 11 tells us, **“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)**

---

<sup>2</sup> Matt Papa, *Look and Live*. p. 69

Now God was about to reveal the most magnificent sneak peak of the climax of his whole plan of salvation. **“Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place *The LORD Will Provide.*”** (Genesis 22:13,14). Just as Abraham had told Isaac, God himself provided the lamb. This ram serves as more than just the substitute sacrifice on that day, but as a *type of Christ*, a beautiful foreshadowing image of what God would provide on that mountain for the whole world.

Remember how God insisted on this one special mountain in the region of Moriah. There's only one other time where the place name Moriah shows up in the Bible. In 2 Chronicles 3:1, we are told, **“Then Solomon began to build the temple of the LORD in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the LORD had appeared to his father David.”** The temple, the place where every morning and every evening, a lamb was offered on behalf of the people, was built on Mount Moriah, the place where 1000 years before, Abraham named that mountain, “The LORD Will Provide.” And 2000 years after Abraham sacrificed the ram the LORD provided, he provided another lamb, the final Lamb to end all sacrifices.

The Lord put himself through his own test. Before, we wondered how God could demand such a thing from Abraham? We posed the question, or really more of an accusation, “What kind of monster would make a father give up his only beloved son and slay him as a sacrifice?” Here's the deafening reality. *You and I are exactly that kind of monster, who by our sins demanded that God give up his only beloved Son. And that's exactly what he did.*

Remember the Father's voice on the Mount of Transfiguration, **“This is my Son, whom I love!”** Down from the mount of glory, the Lamb went uncomplaining forth, this time knowing exactly what his Father's will would mean for him, rejection, suffering, and death on our behalf. He was led like a Lamb to the slaughter, up the hill to Jerusalem, in the region of Moriah, where Solomon built the temple. There he was condemned and forced to carry the wood to his own sacrifice. And this time, as the lamb was laid upon the wood, the Father didn't stop. He turned his face away and **“He did not spare his only Son, but gave him up for us all.” Romans 8:32**

On the mountain of the LORD, God himself provided the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world. This is how we can know in the face of every test and trial we bear, that God is not a monster nor is he tempting us. He longs to bless us in Christ and graciously give us all things through him, just as he repeated the promise of the Savior to Abraham after the test.

God doesn't command us to love him above all because he's some lonely, needy, egomaniac. He does it because he knows anything we love more than him is just going to betray us.<sup>3</sup> He alone can satisfy all our needs. When we see all that God has given up for us, especially during this season of lent, we're happy to walk in the footsteps of our Abraham, to give up what he asks of us and offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. We give up our whole selves to the one who gave himself for us, knowing the LORD will provide everything we need in Christ. Turns out, we gain so much more than anything we give up for Lent. Amen.

*Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him. (James 1:12)*

---

<sup>3</sup> Matt Papa, Look and Live. p 72