



On your marks

The great heroes of the Bible were as human as the rest of us. Their journeys of faith in God also took them through times of great despair as well as hope. In Abraham's case, his lowest moment was probably when he was asked to offer his own son as a sacrifice. What was this all about? This session explores this well-known story with activities, craft, prayer ideas and questions to discuss.

Get set

You will need:

- 12 medium-sized stones (large enough to fit in the palm of the hand and with a surface you can write on with washable marker pens)
- Post-it notes
- pens or pencils

You can find the story in Genesis 22:1-19. There is a retelling of this story in [The Barnabas Family Bible](#) and a retelling in cockney in *The Bible in Cockney*.

Go!

Background to the story

Abraham is called the 'friend of God' three times in the Bible. What an amazing thing! Friends with Almighty God! It's a privilege that Christians believe they can enjoy too. God in Christ invites people to be friends with God. The special friendship in Abraham's story is called the covenant - a committed friendship with God, evidenced by the change of name, circumcision and God's amazing promises. And that friendship doesn't change or get watered down even if we mess up. God promises always to stay friends.

Abraham messed up often: he told lies while in Egypt; he grew impatient waiting for his wife to have a child; and his faith was often put to the test. Now, in this story, Abraham has to decide who will come first - his precious son Isaac, for whom he had waited 20 years, or his God. Some of the other tribes in Canaan at this time in history used to sacrifice their children to their gods. Was God that sort of god too? This story explores both the new depths of Abraham's faith as well as God's plans right from the beginning of the Bible to provide a way out from the shadow of death.

Opening up the story

a. Have you ever wondered why a town or city has the name it does? Why is Birmingham called Birmingham, London, London or Portsmouth, Portsmouth? Do you know the meaning of the place where you live? This Bible story is recorded partly to explain why a hill near modern-day Jerusalem is called Jehovah-Jireh, which means God will provide (Genesis 22:14).



b. Challenge your group (either individually or in 2s and 3s) to make a list of the ten most important items they would definitely want to keep if they had to leave their homes suddenly, never to be able to return. Talk about their choices briefly and then say they can only now keep three items from this list. Which would survive? Now, finally, say they can only keep one item. What is the most precious thing in their lives?

- What if they had to make a choice between keeping this and obeying God?
- What would that feel like?
- How difficult would it be?
- What if that most precious thing were a person?
- How would that change their response?

This is the challenge that Abraham faced in today's story

Telling the story

The story is about a mysterious journey where only God knows what will happen in the end: the servants think it is about worship but are eventually left behind (Genesis 22:5); Isaac is completely puzzled (Genesis 22:7-8); and Abraham has to trust that God knows what he is doing (Genesis 22:8).

Read the story together in an accessible translation or retelling and then divide up into 2s or 3s, with each group having someone representing the different participants – the servants, Isaac, Abraham. Imagine what they would have said to the others back home in Beersheba about what had happened.

You could also include Abraham's nephews Uz and Buz (Genesis 22:20-21). What would they have made of the story? Imagine them talking about Uncle Abe as they wait outside St Euphrates' Primary School in Haran: 'Guess what old Uncle Abe's been up to now...'

Talking about the story

This is a story that raises as many questions as it answers and in the Jewish storytelling tradition there is a lot of discussion and commentary on this chapter. At the same time, Christians believe it can show us something more about Abraham as well as something very special about God. Be ready to let your group discover new and perhaps unexpected insights as you explore issues like:

- I wonder why God decided he had to test Abraham.
- Wasn't this a particularly harsh test to put him through?
- Maybe Abraham misunderstood the character of God and got him mixed up with the human-sacrifice-loving Canaanite gods?
- Why do you think Abraham obeyed God?
- Do you think Abraham believed his own reply to Isaac that 'God will provide a lamb' (Genesis 22:8)?
- Think of the most important thing in your life. Would you be prepared to give it up if God asked you?

- I wonder what God was doing and thinking while Abraham and Isaac walked up the mountain together
- What do you think Abraham learned as a result of this test? And what did Isaac take away from all this?
- What can we learn from this story about God and about ourselves?

Playing with the story

Abraham was being asked to trust God big time. When he told Isaac that 'God would provide' it was like saying: 'I trust that God knows what he is doing. God knows best.' It might seem easy to say this when life is going well, but not when your whole future is in the balance.

Working together, build your own Mount Moriah out of stones. But first invite your group to write one of the words from the following sentence of faith on each of the 12 stones:

I TRUST THAT GOD KNOWS WHAT HE IS DOING. GOD KNOWS BEST

Individuals might like to decorate each stone further with colours or symbols that express Abraham's faith in God - a faith that took him from a place of despair to hope. A simpler 'mountain' could be formed with just three stones that read 'God will provide'.

Reflecting on the story

Abraham faced an agonising choice when God asked him to give up everything he had hoped for and do what God said. Many Christians have faced similar testing moments on their journey of faith when God seemed to be asking them to do the impossible, or even unthinkable.

Cut up some square post-it notes into mountain-shaped triangles and hand them to the group as you gather for a time of prayer. Invite them to think of some of the testing things that they are facing this week and to write a word or draw a picture on the post-it that symbolises these. Now gather around the stone mountain of faith that you have built and, after a short time of silence, invite each person to stick their note to the mountain, saying together each time 'God will provide'.