

The Ultimate Test of Faith

Genesis 22:1-14

In your spiritual journey there will be tests of faith-- times of trial, painful decisions, uncommon pressures that show the true stuff your faith is made of. These tests stretch your faith. They grow it. They strengthen it. In fact, if we could chart our spiritual growth, we would find that most every victory, almost each period of growth is preceded by such a test of faith.

Of all the trials of life, though, there is one, perhaps, that is harder than all the rest. It is that watershed moment on which the whole of your life turns. It is your burning bush, your Goliath, your road to Damascus, your Gethsemane. It is saying 'yes' to that one opportunity that changes the course of your life. Or perhaps it was having the fortitude to say 'no.' Maybe it is that final victory over that habitual sin that has plagued your family for generations. It may simply be that moment that we surrender our lives completely to God.

But don't think this is necessarily something that comes early in life. Abraham is a teenager when this happens. He's in his hundred and teens. My dad had been in the pulpit ministry for 30 years when God called him into the prison ministry. When most guys were thinking about retirement, my dad was just discovering what God's plan for his life really was. My dad told me, "I understand now what Moses felt like at the burning bush. I know what Abraham felt like. I realize that my whole life has been preparing me for this one moment."

It is to this point that God brings Abraham in Genesis 22. Abraham has shown us several areas of weakness, and in each he showed a lack of trust in God's provision. In the face of famine, he took matters into his own hands and ran to Egypt. He didn't trust God to provide for him. Twice, he lied about his relationship with his wife. He didn't trust God to protect him. In perhaps his biggest lack of faith, he tried to have God's promised child his own way, by taking his wife's maidservant, Hagar as another wife. He didn't trust God's promise.

But Abraham has grown from these mistakes, Isaac, the promised child has been born, but there is one, final, ultimate test of faith. Does Abraham love God most, even more than His promised child? Will He trust in God's provision? God asks Abraham to make the most unimaginable sacrifice for any parent to make. And what can we learn for ourselves from Abraham's final exam of faith?

Let's look at three ways we can respond to and grow from these tests in our lives. The first is so basic, but in this age of the false health and wealth gospel, we need to emphasize it...

I. Expect tests From God (1-2)

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, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about."

Who tested Abraham? God tests Abraham. The word used for *tested* here means “to put to the proof.” It is one thing to claim you believe in something, one thing to profess your faith, but to actually trust in the face of real trials in life, that is the proof. This putting to the proof isn't something only for Abraham. Every believer will experience times of testing. Though trying and difficult, these times are meant for our good and are a blessing. James writes, “*consider it pure joy my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking in anything.* (1:2-4)”

Tests come from God in different shapes and sizes.

- ***By demanding great sacrifices*** — that's what he does here
- ***By leading us in a difficult way***

Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in our heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. (Dt. 8:2)

- ***By Giving Opportunities for Choice***

At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon during the night in a dream, and God said, “Ask for whatever you want me to give you.” (I Kings 3:5)

- ***By Proposing Hard Tasks***

When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, ‘Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?’

He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do. (Jn. 6:5-6)

- ***By Permitting Us to Suffer***

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor. 12:7-10)

There are a few things you need to keep in mind about these times of testing. First of all, remember this: God wants you to succeed. God doesn't test you in hopes that you fail. He

presents a challenge in your life with the goal that you rise up to meet it. Satan is the one who tempts you hoping that you fall flat on your face. God tests you so that you will succeed. Satan tempts so that you may fail.

Secondly, God never tests you without first preparing you. Occasionally, my daughters will be so aggravated at school, because there is something on a test that was never covered in class or in the book. God doesn't do that. He will never test you without providing all that you need to pass the test. The only catch is that to succeed, you will need to depend upon God. His provision for the test requires you to look beyond our human wisdom and strength. This is why Paul writes in I Corinthians 10:12-13, *"So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! No temptation has seized you except that which is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way through it so that you can stand up under it."*

Abraham had such preparation. In a very real way God had been preparing Abraham for this for nearly 40 years. But he has also been prepared specifically. At the end of the previous chapter, Abraham enjoys a time of worship and refreshing in which he called upon the name of the Lord. Genesis 21:33 says, *"Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there he called upon the name of the Lord, the Eternal God."*

This calm before the storm prepared him for this ultimate test of faith. There are several times in Genesis we are told that Abraham called upon the name of the Lord. This is more than just a prayer. This is an open time of worship. To call upon his name is both to declare who God is, and to ask God to reveal who he is, so that he could draw upon his name, which represents his divine nature and everything that goes with it. That he *"called upon the name of the Lord,"* tells us that Abraham was able to draw deeply upon his intimate relationship with God. The purpose of the tree is a memorial, a memento, a reminder that would last generations.

God will also prepare you for your tests of faith. But you must also be willing to draw deeply upon your relationship with God. Your closeness with God may be the only thing that enables you to pass the test. Often when we go through times that are peaceful and restful, we grow lax in our spiritual lives. We take God's provision for granted and grow distant in our relationship with Him. We need to see that these times of calm as an oasis in the desert meant by God to prepare us for difficult times ahead.

Though God will not test us without provision and preparation, these tests often come

unexpectedly. Perhaps they are unexpected because they often come after peaceful, restful times. This is how it happened with Abraham. One day everything is going along smoothly in his life, then the next his whole world seems threatened. Gene Getz remarks about this, *"When everything is going smoothly, when we've worked out our problems well at one level, God suddenly tests us to raise us to a whole new level of patience and endurance."*

This brings us to one final characteristic of tests of faith, and that is that God's tests are often designed to help us grow in our weakest areas. Again consider what happens to Abraham here. He is asked to sacrifice that which he has waited his whole life to get, his promised, beloved son. God even drew attention to this fact by pointing out that Isaac was his only son, and he loved him very much. But Abraham failed before in not trusting God to provide this promised son. This boy had become the center of Abraham's life. If we were to ask him whom he loved more, God or Isaac, it may have been a difficult question to answer.

That is why God tests him in this most sensitive area of his life. Was he willing to put the Lord before Isaac? Was he willing to obey God, rather than following his own desires? God will test you in your most vulnerable areas. He will seek to strengthen you where you are weak. We should not be surprised by these tests. We should expect them.

II. Focus on Promises, Not Explanations (3-5)

The human part of us wonders how Abraham could ever consider doing such a thing. Many people struggle with the story of Isaac's sacrifice. It is deeply troubling. How could God ever ask such a thing? How could a loving father ever even pretend that he would go through with such a thing? How come Abraham didn't argue with God to save Isaac like he argued on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah? Liberal theologians who don't view the Bible as the authoritative Word of God without error have dismissed this passage as nothing more than myth and legend. They say the true history is lost in centuries of embellishments. They say the God of the N.T. had evolved and grown from this primitive portrait painted in Genesis.

I recently read a book where a Christian author traced a secondary line of Jewish interpretation and rabbinical tradition. He builds on this to suggest that God never wanted Abraham to be willing to offer Isaac. He says this wasn't a test of obedience, but a test of relationship. This author believes that God wanted Abraham to argue with him, to plead with him. He also believes that Abraham failed the test, not passed it.

Though appealing on some levels, his view doesn't fit with what the Bible says about this

account. We want some sort of explanation to make sense of all this. Looking back on this thousands of years later, from the perspective of the New Testament, we have some explanation. But Abraham didn't have any explanation. All he had was the promise of God.

Hebrews 11 commends Abraham's faith here, and indicates that in indeed he passed the test. It says that he believed God's promise, and he even reasons that God could raise Isaac from the dead if necessary. I believe Abraham was perfectly willing to be obedient to God, but I also don't think Abraham believed that Isaac would ultimately die, and Abraham didn't believe God intended for him to.

That doesn't make this test any less difficult. God did want to know that He was more important than everything else, and everyone else in Abraham's life. Jesus asks the very same thing of you and me. And he does it in language we're very uncomfortable with. Luke 14:26-27 says, *"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters-yes, even his own life-he cannot be my disciple."* Yes, this is a figure of speech. He's not saying that we should not love our family, but that we should love him most. If your love for your parents, or your love for your spouse, or your love for your children comes before your love for God, something is messed up. God must come before everything, and everyone. When it comes to your parents, or your children, or your spouse, you love them best, and you love them most, when you love Him first!

God never intended for Abraham to kill Isaac. He only wanted to make sure that Abraham trusted Him and loved him most. But how could Abraham ever go along with this? Because he relied on the promises of God. He knew that Isaac was the promised child. He knew that it was through Isaac that he would have many descendants. He knew that it was through Isaac that he would become a great nation. He knew these things, because God had promised them, and God's promise was enough.

Abraham sincerely believed this event would not end in Isaac's death. Look at our text in vs. 5. Who does Abraham say to his servants is coming back? He says "we." He believed both he and Isaac would be returning from the sacrifice. Now you might be thinking, preacher, you're reading too much into the text. He could have just been saying that because he didn't want his servants to know what was going to happen. But turn in your Bibles in Heb. 11:17-19.

¹⁷ *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,* ¹⁸ *even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned."* ¹⁹ *Abraham*

reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.

Abraham passed this test because he relied on the promises of God. We don't know what Abraham thought when all of this happened. No doubt it was a very painful experience. But there is no record of him arguing with God or questioning him. The natural response would be to demand an explanation. We would ask why? and why me? We would want a blueprint, a detailed schematic of all of God's reasons for wanting to do this. But God doesn't always give us reasons, but He does give us His promises. What we need to remember is that God's promises are as good as reasons. His promises are money in the bank.

God can't always give us the reasons. For one thing, there may be far more than we could possibly understand. God is all knowing and all-wise. His reasons could entail an incalculable number of interconnected threads interwoven in an incomprehensibly complex web of relationships. His purposes may extend far beyond our lives. But another reason for not giving us reasons is that is the very nature of a test of faith. If we had all the information, if we had all the reasons, then it wouldn't be faith. God simply wants us to trust his word, and obey.

III. Trust In God's Provision (6-14)

We have already seen that Abraham trusted in God's promises. He could do that, because he knew God would provide. The toughest part of this trial may have come in vs. 7 when Isaac questioned him, *"Dad, this is a great idea and all. You know I love the Lord, and we have everything here for a sacrifice. Everything, that is, except for the animal. What are we going to sacrifice?"* That question must have pierced Abraham's heart deeply. But his response showed how deeply he trusted in God's provision, *"God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering my son."*

This confidence in God's provision must have been tremendous indeed, for it apparently rubbed off on Isaac. How did Abraham convince Isaac to cooperate in the apparent sacrifice? I remember a picture in an old children's Bible that showed Isaac as being a toddler, but given the timetable of Genesis, he would have been well into his teen years by this time. Abraham's confidence in God was so strong that he placed his son on the altar, and it was strong enough to influence Isaac, to allow himself to be placed on the altar without putting up a fight.

We too can trust in God's provision. Our sinful natures want to cling to the things of this world. We trust in our earthly securities to provide what we need. But our ultimate trust should not be placed in the earthly things we cling to. It should be in God.

There is also in this text, a prophetic glimpse at God's ultimate provision. We see here a foreshadowing of God's offering of his own Son, Jesus Christ. Abraham did not understand scope of his own words when he said, "*God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering.*" For Jesus too carried the wood for his own sacrifice. He too would die on this very mountain. And He was the perfect lamb for sacrifice, not just for Isaac, but for every single one of us. Because of sin, we all deserve the penalty of death, but by sending His Son, God provided a substitute sacrifice. Just as God delivered Isaac, He delivers us as well.

Conclusion

In Abraham's story we see the nature of true victorious faith. Victorious faith is not the faith that has never wavered, never doubted, never tripped, or never fallen. But in Abraham we see that faith, like a child, crawls before it walks, walks before it runs and runs before it jumps. But God will keep testing you so that you keep going, and keep growing. A victorious faith then is the faith that continues until the end, that believes God's promises after it questions, that gets back up after it falls.

Each one of here today is in the position of either Abraham or Isaac. Those in the position of Isaac are those now that still carry the weight of their own sins. You've never accepted Christ's sacrifice on your behalf. You're still facing the full penalty for your sins. I want you to know that God himself has provided.

Most of us here are in the position of Abraham. We need to learn to put God before all other things in our life. He must come first. Like Abraham, it might be a person. There's a relationship in your life that you love more than God- a boyfriend a girlfriend, a spouse, your parents, your kids. Any of these people can become idols that take the place of God in our lives. It might be a possession, like a house or car; it might be a position, like a job. But no person, possession, or position should ever come before God.