

Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied.

² 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."

³ Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. ⁴ On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. ⁵ 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."

⁶ Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, ⁷ Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?" "Yes, my son?" Abraham replied.

"The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

⁸ Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together.

⁹ When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied.

¹² "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."

¹³ 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. ¹⁴ So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided."

¹⁵ The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time ¹⁶ and said, "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ 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, ¹⁸ and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me." (Genesis 22:1-18)

Would You Pass this Test?

Do you like taking tests? Some people don't test well. Generally tests cause some anxiety. Final exams in college can be a nightmare. But you know what? The real tests of life don't come in school. If your son is arrested, your love for him is going to be tested. If you're diagnosed with cancer, your strength is going to be tested. And in every trial in our lives, our faith is tested. This morning, Moses tells us that God tested Abraham. He didn't give him a hundred math problems and then grade his paper. God put Abraham through the ringer to prove the quality of his faith. You just heard what God asked Abraham to do and how Abraham passed the test with flying colors. My friends, **would you pass this test?**

I.

Before you answer, let me explain the test. When Abraham was 75 years old, God called him to go to the land we know as Israel. God promised him that his descendants would inherit that land. But Abraham had no children. He waited 25 years for Isaac to be born. All of Abraham's hopes and all the promises God had made were wrapped up in this one son, Isaac. Since Abraham was 100 years old when Isaac was born and Isaac had to be at least 12 or 14 when this happened, Abraham had no expectations that more children would come. Yet, 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."** This test can be summed up with a simple question, "What is most important to you, Abraham?"

If Abraham argued or pleaded with God, Moses doesn't tell us about it. Instead, we see him getting up early the next morning and diligently packing and preparing to carry out this command. We see Abraham

making a three day journey and then leaving the servants behind and climbing the mountain and building an altar and arranging the wood for the sacrifice. And then he takes his son, ties him, and lays him on the altar. He pulls out the knife. At the last possible moment, God calls to him from heaven and stops him. But make no mistake about it – Abraham was prepared to carry out this command.

I can't help but wonder what he was thinking. I can't imagine what would go through my mind if God gave me a command like this. Moses doesn't tell us what Abraham was thinking that night before he left. He doesn't give us a hint of his thoughts during that three day journey that Abraham knew must end with his son's blood. The closest we come to an insight is on that last day, when he tells Isaac that the Lord would provide a sacrifice. But otherwise, Moses tells us only what he did, not what he thought or felt.

But God did call Isaac his only son whom he loved. Don't think for a moment that this was easy for Abraham. It was the hardest thing he ever had to do. How could he obey this command? What was he thinking? The Bible does give us the answer. In the book of Hebrews God says, **“By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. ... Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead ...”** He trusted in God. God had called him. God had made promise after promise to him. God had given him this miracle child when he was a hundred years old and his wife was ninety. Abraham understood that there was much more coming to him than simply descendants. He understood that his own Savior was to be born from Isaac's family. Abraham never wavered in his trust in that gospel promise. So if God commanded him to kill Isaac, Abraham trusted that God would raise him. That faith enabled him to do the impossible things that God asked him to do. Abraham passed the test only because he trusted in God and his promises.

My friends, **would you pass this test? Would you put God first?** We do face this same test in our lives. God does not ask us to kill our children. But Jesus said, **“Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.”** So many things demand our attention. It's easy to put God in last place. Every Sunday when we have to drag our kids out of bed and get them to church, it'd be easier just to let them sleep in or play video games. It might even make us a little more popular. It might be more fun to take them sledding or to a sporting event. What comes first in our lives?

Sometimes, we face much sharper tests. Sometimes, we find our faith and our love for our families on a collision course. What would you do if your son or daughter were excommunicated from our church because they refused to repent? I remember a woman who for decades had been a faithful member of a church I served. When her daughter came under church discipline, she told me that she couldn't belong to a church that would go against her daughter. It didn't matter that we were acting in desperate love hoping that her daughter would repent. The daughter came first. Can you understand the mother's grief? Would you leave like she did? I remember a man who tried to raise his sons to know the Lord. One of them told him that he was a homosexual. His father was firm in calling that sin and yet telling his son that he loved him. But he would not allow the son's “partner” in his home. When the son insisted that they come together or not at all, his parents were deeply grieved. What would you do?

People we love sometimes demand that we choose them or the word of God. Always, they make us the bad guy if we follow the Lord. Maybe the person you're dating doesn't want to hear about your faith and insists that you move in together, that you have sex after three or four dates, that you spend Sunday morning with them. Maybe your parents don't understand that church you've joined and are deeply offended that they can't commune when their grandchildren are confirmed. Whatever it is, every time it happens, we face the test that Abraham faced. How do we respond?

Do we live up to the standard of faith and obedience that Abraham set? Nobody's going to kill our children, so the consequences of obedience are never as great as they could've been with Abraham. But do we compromise our faith or even give in completely to preserve relationships with people we love? That may seem like a practical solution, but it is not the solution of faith. Deep down, we realize that. We know that God is a God of love. All that he does is for our good. He wants us to love our families – he commands it. So when he calls us, like Abraham, to let go of things that we love more than him, he's not being unloving or unreasonable. He is simply asking us to obey the first commandment: You shall have no other gods before me. Not even the god of family. Not even the god of peace and harmony among people we have to see every day. When we put those people and our relationship with them first, we have set up an idol. For that we deserve to go to hell.

But during this season of Lent, God directs our eyes to Jesus, who set us free from hell. He stands at the heart of this account. God sent Abraham to Mt. Moriah. That was the future site of the Jewish temple. In that place Abraham's descendants would offer sacrifices for almost a thousand years. Every one of those sacrifices was a picture of Christ. Jesus, the holy and innocent Lamb of God, laid down his life because we sinners keep putting other things and other people in God's place. Jesus died to set us free from the hell we deserve. He wiped away God's record of every time we put our children or our parents or our girlfriends or anybody else in the place that only God should have in our hearts. He erased all the little idols we set up in our lives day after day. He made us pure and holy in God's sight. Even though we still struggle with feeling guilty, God finds us innocent in his court. He has declared that we are holy and righteous and totally free from sin because Jesus laid down his life in our place.

II.

After God stopped Abraham, he provided a substitute sacrifice. Then God spoke to Abraham and repeated the promise that he had been giving to Abraham for twenty-five years. He said, **"I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ 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, ¹⁸ and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."**

God singled Abraham out for this promise as a reward for his obedience. But we need to be careful here. When we speak of God rewarding our obedience, it's easy for us to think that we earned the reward. That's just not true. It is true that Abraham's faith and obedience rose to a level that few Christians reach. But that doesn't mean that God owed him a reward. Abraham did what a believer is supposed to do: he trusted God and obeyed. The reward that God gave really reflects God's love rather than reflecting any merit on Abraham's part. We cannot earn a reward from God. If we were perfect in our faith and obedience, we would still just be doing what we're supposed to do. But God loves us. And he does promise to reward our obedience. We don't earn it. We don't deserve it. But God does give it.

What was Abraham's reward? His descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore. God kept that promise. He says so, already in the Old Testament. But in the Old Testament, the prophet Hosea applied this promise to people who were not physical descendants of Abraham. He prophesied a new people coming to be the people of God. The New Testament is clear in the fulfillment. You and I are the true people of God. We are descendants of Abraham not by blood but by faith. Everyone who trusts in the Savior that Abraham was waiting for is a part of his people and a part of this promise.

We are Abraham's reward. We mean that much to God. That gives us a new perspective on the test God called Abraham to face and on the tests we face. **Would you pass this test? Would you receive this promise?** The truth is, we already have this same promise. Like Abraham, God promised us eternal life. God promised a people that will last forever. Like Abraham, God promises us spiritual descendants. For as long as this world endures, the gospel will work. God will bring people to share our faith.

Don't we want our physical descendants to be a part of that people? For as long as this world lasts, we want to do everything we can to pass the gospel on to them. This church exists so that we and our children hear the gospel. That's why we operate a school. That's also why we reach out into the community. It's why we gather here on Sunday mornings. We hear the word so that our faith grows and flourishes and we and our children can pass the tests God sets before us.

And we parents want to make sure that our lives back up our words. Think about Isaac for a moment. What do you think he felt as his father prepared to sacrifice him? The Bible never tells us. But it does present him as a man of faith. He, too, was waiting for Jesus. What did he learn about that from watching his father's commitment to the Lord? My friends, we are going to face tests to our faith. In all those tests, our children are watching. The Christian life that we live is a lesson they will see and learn. The Lamb of God has taken away all our failures. He calls us to love him by teaching our children to love him and put him first. He calls us to model our faith to them. By itself, a Christian example won't save anybody. But Christians who know their Savior live for their Savior. That means we bring our children to hear the gospel so that they can understand our lives and our faith. And we pray that they grow to even greater levels of commitment to the Lord.

All of that comes from faith. God will not come to us as he did to Abraham and command us to sacrifice our children on an altar. But over and over again, we face tests. Only faith in Christ will enable us to

pass those tests. That very faith is a gift of God that comes through the gospel. Hear that gospel message and trust in Jesus your Savior. Amen.