

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

*"Here I am," he replied.*

*<sup>2</sup> 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."*

*<sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. <sup>5</sup> 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."*

*<sup>6</sup> 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, <sup>7</sup> 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?"*

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

*<sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. <sup>11</sup> But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!"*

*"Here I am," he replied.*

*<sup>12</sup> "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."*

*<sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> 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."*

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

### **Why Did Abraham Do This?**

The other day, I was talking to one of my catechism students. I won't say who she was, except to say that her mom is a teacher here but not in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. We were talking about how mean her mom is. All this poor, deprived child wants is for her mom to fly her out to San Diego and spend \$300 so that she can swim in a pool with sea otters for a couple of hours. What kind of parent would deny their child an opportunity like that? It sounds like child abuse, doesn't it? Now, I admit, I threw that in there just for the laugh, but at the same time, it does lead into the way I want to talk about our Old Testament lesson for today. It's the famous account of Abraham sacrificing his son Isaac. Unlike my little joke about modern kids and parents, I think that many people today would be horrified by this account – especially in the week after another school shooting. If this is the first time you heard it, what would you think of it? Assuming that you know that Abraham is supposed to be a good guy, I can imagine asking the question why? **Why did Abraham do this?**

#### **I.**

**Because God told him to.** That's the short answer. But maybe we should back up a little. Abraham was 75 years old when God called him to leave his home and move to a new country. At that time, he had no children. He would wait another 25 years to have this child, Isaac. His culture valued having children above almost all other possible blessings of this life. But in Abraham's case, it was even more important. When he came to this land, God promised him that his descendants would inherit it. God promised him that he would make those descendants into a great nation. They would be as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand on

the seashore. They would defeat their enemies and live in prosperity. And through them, God promised to bless all nations of the earth. With that last promise, he was talking about Jesus, who is the greatest blessing that we Gentiles can possibly have. All those blessings would come from Abraham's descendants. Eventually, Isaac was born. And God made it clear that all those promises that Abraham had built his entire life around would come true through him.

Now, 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.”** Do you think God understood what he was asking Abraham to do? Of course he did. He called Isaac “your only son.” Without him, none of those promises could come true. And God called him, “your son whom you love.” This child was the joy of Abraham's life. All of us who have children know how much they mean to us. We don't like to think about it, but we all know how devastated we would be if one of our children died.

God knows that, too. Still, he issued this command. And Abraham obeyed. For us today, there is just something unthinkable about this. We all recognize that God was asking Abraham to decide who came first in his life. Without a doubt, God demanded that he come first. In America today, that seems like fanaticism. If you polled most people today and asked them who should come first, your God or your children, don't you think that the overwhelming majority would say your children? When we see a story in the news about parents refusing medical treatment for their children because of religious objections, don't we think that's terrible? Of course, the Bible doesn't say you can't have a blood transfusion, so our outrage is justified. But what about a Christian parent who has a child with a blood cancer or an immune disorder and the doctors prescribe stem cell therapy and that child's parents refuse, because the stem cells came from aborted fetal tissue? They put their religious principles above their child's health. Can we live with that? What about parents who work six days a week, and only have Sunday to spend with their families? Dare they take two or three of those precious hours and insist on going to church instead of spending quality time with their kids?

Where does God stand in our lives? That was the question God put to Abraham. Had Isaac become his god or did Abraham still put the Lord first in his life? When you understand that, you begin to understand why Abraham did what he did. In that respect, he is a model for us today. Thankfully, God is never going to ask us to tie up our children and pull out a knife and slit their throats – which is what Abraham was about to do because that's how you sacrificed a burnt offering. But God does tell us to put him first in our lives. Do you think that's only an Old Testament thing? Do you think that Jesus would never go along with something like that? Well, 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.”**

It all comes down to who is our god. Your god is the thing you love most. Your god is the thing that drives the decisions you make and the way you view life. Your god is the thing you work for and sacrifice for and dedicate your life to. Is that the Lord in heaven or is it our children? Or our jobs? Or our standard of living? Abraham put God first in his life. So he did this unthinkable thing because God told him to.

## II.

That's pretty harsh, isn't it? Why did Abraham put God first like that? What separates him from parents who convince their children that they should serve God by tying explosives to their chests and stepping out into a crowd and blowing themselves up? It's more than just the fact that they worship a false god, although that is part of it. The difference is the kind of God that asked Abraham to do this. The difference is what God did in Abraham's life and in Abraham's heart. The difference is the purpose God had in mind when he asked Abraham to do this. My friends, **why did Abraham do this? Because he trusted God's promises.**

What was God's purpose in asking Abraham to do this? The very first sentence of our text tells us: **“God tested Abraham.”** God examined Abraham's heart to see what was in it. Again and again, the Old Testament uses this language, both for hard things and for blessings that God sends his people. It's not that God doesn't know what's in our hearts. But he sends things that will bring what's in our hearts out in our lives. He sends challenges that have to be responded to in faith. He sends blessings that could be abused or that could lead to pride, so that faith can show itself by avoiding those sins. He gives hard, even unthinkable commands, to give our faith the opportunity to demonstrate that we are indeed clinging to our Lord. Every command that God gives us has an element of testing in it. Just as every hardship and sorrow does. And even every joy and blessing. God sends all those things so that our faith can show itself to him and to us. That's what was different about God's purpose.

The story of Abraham is the story of God building the faith of his child. There were times that Abraham failed the test. Twice he passed his wife off as his sister and almost got her assaulted sexually. Both times he failed because he didn't trust God enough to obey his will. Now, God flipped the situation around and asked him to do something most would condemn. This time he did it. Then God gave him back his Son and reaffirmed his promises to build Abraham's faith in the love of his Lord.

In a land filled with idols, God gave Abraham faith. God made promises and he reached into Abraham's heart through those promises. Abraham believed God when he said that through Isaac, the Savior of the world – Abraham's Savior – would come. So when God told him to kill that son, the book of Hebrews tells us that Abraham reasoned that God would bring Isaac back from the dead because God's promise had to come true.

That's the kind of God who asked Abraham to do this unthinkable thing. You often hear that the Old Testament God is an angry God, a God of vengeance and bloodshed. But the New Testament God is the God of love. That just isn't true. The New Testament God is also a God of vengeance who will judge the world when the time comes. The Old Testament God is a God of love who never fails to rescue and nurture his people. Abraham did not obey this command because he was afraid of God. He didn't do this because he was worried about fire and brimstone if he disobeyed. Abraham knew the God of love who had taken him to a new land and protected him from one enemy after another. Abraham knew the God of promise who had come to him again and again and renewed his promise that through him all nations on earth would be blessed. Abraham knew the Promise Keeper who told him he would have a miracle child and then waited until Abraham was one hundred years old and his wife was ninety and then gave him Isaac. Abraham trusted God because his word had created faith in his heart and his love had strengthened that faith over and over again.

That is the God that we listen to as well. This past week, I started sending out letters to our members about their church attendance. Everyone should get one by the time this process is done. Why do we come to church? Why do we sacrifice our time and our money and our children's opportunities to go to San Diego and swim with otters to advance the mission of this organization? It's not to perpetuate an organization or to make me look good. It's not because we built a building. And it's not because God is watching and he's going to pat us on the back if we show up and smack us down if we skip. We come to church because the God who loves us tells us to. And he blesses us when we do by pointing us to Jesus, the Savior who rescues us.

The truth is, we are all guilty of putting other things in God's place sometimes. It's easy for family to be more important to us than God is. We see that when we care more about the opinions of family members than what God says. We see that when we don't want those members of our family who don't go to church to mock us for the way we live. It's easy for our jobs or our standard of living to be more important to us than coming and hearing God's word. That's all sin. When we think that we get to judge and if God asks us to do something unreasonable or uncomfortable or unthinkable, we won't do that, then we are committing the sin that Abraham avoided. When we can't imagine loving God more than our own children, we are worshipping idols. All that sin deserves God's punishment in hell.

But God sent his Son Jesus to rescue us from our own sin and idol worship. God sent Jesus to be even a more devoted follower than Abraham was. Unlike Abraham, Jesus never fell short. His faith was always perfect. And that perfect faith counts for us. Jesus laid down his life to pay for our sin. Unlike Isaac, Jesus really was sacrificed for us. Unlike Abraham, God really did kill his own Son for us. Like the ram that Abraham eventually did kill, Jesus took our place and died our death and his blood pays for all that we are guilty of. Jesus paid for every time we worshipped an idol. Jesus paid for every time we didn't want to accept the hard things that Scripture says. Jesus paid for every time we were guilty in our thoughts and our feelings, as well as in our words and deeds. And now there is nothing left to pay. There is no more sacrifice that needs to be made. Our sins are gone forever. Jesus rose to tell us that.

This is one of the most powerful stories in all the Old Testament. Abraham loved Isaac. But he trusted God and obeyed his command. Many Jewish authorities consider this to be the most messianic text in the whole Old Testament because it brings together these themes of sacrifice and rescue, of obedience and trust and God's love. In the end, why did Abraham do this? Because he was a believer. God had changed his heart and made him his child. Abraham knew the God who loved him and made promises to him and he obeyed him. God did not let his command hurt Abraham. He stopped him from killing his Son and he blessed his faith. God loves us. God sent Jesus for us. God calls us to put him first in our lives. He promises that he will never stop blessing our faith. Trust the God who loves you and live for him. Amen.