

Genesis 22:1-19

The Testing of Abraham

Having been a teacher for the past thirty-eight years, I have given many tests. Some of these are brief quizzes to see how students are doing on some particular material we are covering, others are final exams that have significant impact on the final grade. The brief quiz is limited both in what it demands of the student, and in the breadth of knowledge expected. The final exam is not only more extensive in size, but requires the student to put together all that they have learned from the entire course of study.

God, too, offers us tests. But His tests have an entirely different purpose. He does not test us to determine how we are progressing in our Christian walk, His omniscience already provides Him with that information. The tests God offers are designed to give us an opportunity to grow in our faith and to allow us to see our areas of strength and weakness, that we may rely more on Him during future times of testing.

That God tests His people is understood. God's tests are not cruel or unfair, since His purpose is to prove our faith.

“Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day’s portion every day, that I may test them, whether or not they will walk in My instruction’” (Exodus 16:4).

“You shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not” (Deuteronomy 8:2).

“²¹I also will no longer drive out before them any of the nations which Joshua left when he died, ²²in order to test Israel by them, whether they will keep the way of the Lord to walk in it as their fathers did, or not” (Judges 2:21-22).

We are even encouraged to seek out these tests.

“Examine me, O Lord, and try me;
Test my mind and my heart” (Psalms 26:2).

“²³Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me and know my anxious thoughts;
²⁴And see if there be any hurtful way in me,
And lead me in the everlasting way” (Psalm 139:23-24).

And we should rejoice when we are tested, knowing that is is not only for God's glory but our good.

“Moses said to the people, ‘do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin’” (Exodus 20:20).

“In the wilderness He fed you manna which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do good for you in the end” (Deuteronomy 8:16).

²“Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, ³knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. ⁴And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:2-4).

Today we come to the great test in the life of Abraham. It might even be considered a final exam of sorts, since Abraham had been walking with God for some forty or forty-five years at this point in his life. He had many other tests before, but this one experience was designed to sum up all that Abraham knew and believed about his God. It was the ultimate test of Abraham’s faith.

The Test

This is also perhaps the best known event in the life of Abraham. The narrative is known in the Jewish tradition as the *‘āqedâ*. It was the final test of Abraham’s faith, and no greater test could be given to a father. “Now it came about after these things that God tested Abraham” (v. 1). The chronology is unclear, but later details in the passage indicate that it must have been several years after the celebration of the weaning of Isaac and the visit from Abimelech and Phicol. For example, as we will see, Isaac can not only climb a mountain, but do so carrying a load of wood. Thus he must no longer have been a toddler, but we cannot with precision state exactly how old Isaac was.

Curiously, the early Jewish tradition of the Midrash suggested that Isaac was thirty-seven years old at the time of the test. This age is arrived at by considering that Sarah was ninety when she gave birth to Isaac and that Sarah died at the age of one hundred twenty-seven (Genesis 23:1). The assumption is that Sarah died suddenly because she understood that Abraham had left to sacrifice Isaac. Dramatic as this may read, however, such an argument has no support in the biblical narrative.

While the age of Isaac may be uncertain, the test was clear and straightforward. God ¹said to him, ‘Abraham!’ And he said ‘here I am.’ ²And He said, ‘take now your son your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you’” (v. 1-2). The identity of the sacrifice is made clear in poignant, and unmistakable, language. God used increasingly intimate language as He asked for “your son” “your only son” “whom you love.” The precision left no doubt. There could have been no confusion on Abraham’s part as to whom he was to offer as a sacrifice.

There is, however, some confusion regarding the location of the mountain in Moriah. The only other biblical reference refers to the location of the temple built by Solomon. “Then Solomon began to build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the Lord had appeared to his father David, at the place that David had prepared on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite” (2 Chronicles 3:1). That reference was used by Jews to show that the place of Abraham’s offer of Isaac was the same mountain. Today the Muslim shrines of El-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock occupy the presumed site.

Some have raised questions as to the very nature of the test itself. That is, did God really command child sacrifice? From ancient Jewish traditions in the Talmud, to liberal Christians theologians such as Søren Kierkegaard, the meaning of the text has been twisted to imply that God did not really demand such a horrific act. Scripture itself was used in defense of this argument.

“You shall not give any of your offspring to offer them to Molech, nor shall you profane the name of your God; I am the Lord” (Leviticus 18:21).

“There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire” (Deuteronomy 18:10).

Each of these statements indicate that God forbade the sacrifice and burning of children as an act of worship. And surely God is not so selfish that His point was that such offerings could be made to Him alone and not to false pagan deities. Yet the narrative taken as a whole, with the provision of the lamb and the continued promises of blessing to Abraham, indicate that God never intended the knife to fall and thus never intended for Isaac to be sacrificed. Thus the test God offered was entirely within His character and in no way impugns His holiness.

Abraham’s response to the command was prompt. “Abraham rose early the next morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him” (v. 3). There was a sense of urgency in Abraham’s behavior. He did not delay. He did not hesitate hoping for a change of mind from God. He did not negotiate trying to substitute another (as he had done with Eliezer of Damascus and Ishmael). He simply obeyed. That he also brought the wood was indication that he was leaving nothing to chance. If the location around the mountain was bereft of timber, Abraham would still be supplied with the materials needed for the sacrifice. Amazingly, Abraham was allowing himself no excuses.

The party made good time, and Scripture does not record any conversations among the four travelers. Did Abraham pray in his heart “if it is possible, let this cup pass from me”? Scripture is silent on the matter, though any parent can appreciate the struggle Abraham must have had within. In any case, “on the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place in the distance” (v. 4). On the third day need not mean that they traveled three full days to reach the site. As often in Scripture any part of a day sufficed for the whole. So it could have been the morning of the third day. If the mountain in question was in Jerusalem, and if Abraham proceeded from his home in Beersheba (which is likely), the journey was some fifty miles. An average of some sixteen or seventeen miles a day is quite reasonable for four healthy travelers.

While Scripture does not record what Abraham felt at the moment he looked up and saw the mountain on which he was to sacrifice his son, it does record what he said and did. “Abraham said to his young men, ‘stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go yonder; and we will worship and return to you’” (v. 5). We cannot miss the details of the parting. Abraham said, “we will return to you.” Was it to ease the concern of Isaac? Was it to quell any suspicions of his servants? Was it faith that somehow God would not allow Isaac to die?

A later New Testament passages offers some clues. “¹⁷By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; ¹⁸it was he to whom it was said, ‘in Isaac your descendants shall be called.’ ¹⁹He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead” (Hebrews 11:17-19). Abraham had come to place such faith in God that he was willing to obey what seemed an impossible command, because he knew that somehow God would be faithful to Himself. God had promised Abraham heirs. Abraham did not have to understand *how* God would keep His promises; he simply knew that He would.

The Walk

When they came to within the site of the mountain on which Isaac was to be offered, “Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son, and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together” (v. 6). Abraham was old. Carrying the wood would have been a burden. Quite naturally he took advantage of his young and healthy son to carry the load.

The word used for knife describes the kind used for the dismemberment of its victim. It was the kind of knife that would have been used to not only slit the throat of the sacrificial animal, but cut its body into pieces for the ease of sacrificial burning. Its very presence in the hand of Abraham must have disturbed him greatly.

The two walked on. Abraham, the ancient patriarch, perhaps one hundred fifteen years old, and his adolescent son. What conversations did they have? As they journeyed, what did they talk about? How Abraham must have wished for a way of escape, yet he moved relentlessly forward. He had sent Ishmael away, and now he was to kill Isaac. One cannot help but be reminded of Jesus as He set His face toward Jerusalem, though He knew it meant the cross. Yet, Abraham did not waver. Though he and Isaac were entirely alone, Abraham continued toward the place God had revealed to him.

Isaac asked a question. Noticing the obvious, Isaac, “⁷said, ‘my father!’ And he said, ‘here I am, my son.’ And he said, ‘behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?’ ⁸Abraham said, ‘God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.’ So the two of them walked on together” (v. 7-8).

Isaac, it can reasonably be assumed, had often seen his father at worship. In his time, Isaac had seen his father offer many animals in sacrificial worship of God. He understood what was involved in the process. There was blood. There was death. As they made their way up the mountain, quite naturally Isaac wondered where the beast was that they were to offer to God. It is usual for the supplicant to provide the animal for worship. Yet Abraham stated that God would provide the animal for worship in this case. He did not elaborate.

The Sacrifice

When “they came to the place of which God had told him; and Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood, and bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood” (v. 9). Isaac was certainly able to resist his elderly father had he wished to do so. We cannot miss the point that he was a willing victim. Isaac had asked “where is the lamb?” Now he did not ask “why are you binding me?”

Abraham's two servants were miles away. Isaac chose to submit to his father's request that he allow himself to be bound and placed upon the altar in preparation for sacrifice. Isaac had seen this before. He could not have been unaware of what was going to happen to him.

The moment came. "Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son" (v. 10). Again we must note that the narrative flows without interruption. Abraham acted without hesitation. But, as He often does in moments of crisis, God intervened. And He did so with the urgency required in such circumstances. "¹¹The angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!'" (v. 11). The repetition reminds the reader of other situations where God intended that His message not be missed.

"Moses, Moses" (Exodus 3:4).

"Samuel, Samuel (1 Samuel 3:4).

"Saul, Saul" (Acts 9:4).

Abraham, focused as he was on what he was about to do, heard. "¹¹And he said, 'here I am.' ¹²He said, 'do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me'" (v. 11-12). Whatever commendation we might offer to Isaac for his obedience, we must remember that it was Abraham who was being tested.

And his test was the same basic test that God has always demanded from His people,

"¹²Now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require from you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹³and to keep the Lord's commandments and His statutes which I am commanding you today for your good?" (Deuteronomy 10:12-13).

Abraham had feared God. Abraham had walked in God's ways. Abraham had served God with all his heart. Abraham had kept God's commandments.

And God had, indeed, provided the sacrifice. "¹³Then Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up for a burnt offering in the place of his son. ¹⁴Abraham called the name of that place The Lord Will Provide, as it is said to this day, 'in the mount of the Lord it will be provided'" (v. 13-14). This was the epitome of substitutionary atonement. Whether the ram had been there all along, and Abraham in his distress had failed to notice it, or whether it appeared suddenly is of little importance. The point is that God had provided the sacrifice.

Note Abraham's humility. He calls the place "God Will Provide" not "Abraham Obeyed." The name did not emphasize Abraham's role in the narrative but God's. Even when at his very best, and we cannot but see this as the very highpoint of Abraham's faith, he knew he was but the servant. Abraham recognized that his righteous actions were nothing compared with God's perfect grace.

But God was not yet finished with Abraham. In the hearing of both Abraham and Issac,
“¹⁵the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, ¹⁶and said, ‘by Myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. ¹⁸In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice’” (v. 15-18).

First, we can see that God swore by Himself. There can be no higher standard. This is an announcement usually reserved for the great prophets.

“I have sworn by Myself,
The word has gone forth from My mouth in righteousness
And will not turn back,
That to Me every knee will bow, every tongue will swear allegiance” (Isaiah 45:23).

“‘But if you will not obey these words, I swear by Myself,’ declares the Lord, ‘that this house will become a desolation’” (Jeremiah 22:5).

Second, we notice that all of God’s promises are renewed. God will greatly bless Abraham. God will greatly multiply his seed. God will allow Abraham and his descendants to become a great nation. And through Abraham, God will bless all the nations of the earth. And all this “because you have obeyed my voice.” But we must also notice that there is now a latent conditionality in the promises. Before, God had promised to do things unconditionally. Now God does them because Abraham obeyed. This is not to say that Abraham earned God’s blessings, but rather that God’s blessings were a reward for his faithful obedience.

This was a point God emphasized later to Isaac, who surely remembered the specific circumstances. God said to Isaac, “⁴I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and will give your descendants all these lands; and by your descendants all the nations of the earth shall be blessed; ⁵because Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws” (Genesis 26:4-5).

So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham lived at Beersheba” (v. 19). We cannot imagine the conversations they had on their return trip.

Takeaways

In this very familiar narrative, let us see clearly some lessons. First, when God called, Abraham was listening. Abraham was attentive to God’s voice. He did not let the busyness of his day, or the activities of his calendar distract him from hearing from God. Abraham did not listen for the voice of God only at times of worship. Abraham was attentive.

Second, when God called, Abraham responded. Abraham did not hold back from God what was most precious to him. Abraham was no compartmental believer. He did not reserve for himself parts of his life

that were his alone. If the life of his beloved son Isaac was God's to do with as He chose, surely there was nothing else Abraham held back.

Third, Abraham trusted God with the future He had promised. Abraham had been promised a certain future by God, and he trusted that God would bring about that future. Abraham had stopped trying to do God's will for Him (remember Hagar). He trusted God to do what God had said He would.

Fourth, we can not underestimate what Isaac learned about his father's faith. As a parent, we all want to model our faith for our children. It is the desire of every godly parent to see their children come to faith in Christ, and every godly parent will do all he or she can to encourage that faith. Attendance at, and involvement in, church activities, teaching discernment in choosing friends, and the general practice of parenting are all invaluable tools. But none in perhaps more important than the modeling of what we believe.

Finally, we can see the following truth.

“Has the Lord as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices
As in obeying the voice of the Lord?
Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice,
And to heed than the fat of rams” (1 Samuel 15:22).

May God give us the grace to pass our tests.