

The Greatest Test of Your Faith

Both in Genesis and the book of Hebrews, this experience in the life of Abraham is referred to as God's test. This account of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son is one of the Bible's most moving accounts of faith. This great narrative is powerful through its artistic restraint, giving those gaps of silence, leaving us to wonder what might have been going through the mind of Abraham and his son, Isaac, as they walk up the mount toward the place of sacrifice.

Read **Genesis 22: 1-14**

22 After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."² He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you."³ So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him.⁴ On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away.⁵ Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you."⁶ Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together.⁷ Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"⁸ Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together.⁹ When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.¹⁰ Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son.¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."¹² He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me."¹³ And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.¹⁴ So Abraham called that place "The LORD will provide" as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided."

Most of my seminary classes began with a prayer, usually offered by the professor or a student. One student volunteered to offer the opening prayer, and earnestly implored, "Lord, help us as we take this test." "Test! What test? A panic-stricken student cried aloud, bringing the prayer to an abrupt halt.

The Christian life is a progression and maturing of our faith relationship with Christ, and along the way in our pilgrimage we face tests. Tests come in many forms, and are allowed by our loving God, not to distress us but to strengthen our

faith and deepen our relationship with Christ. And unlike the aforementioned student, we're not to be surprised when they come. Someday we'll face our greatest test of faith. Scripture says, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, *whenever* you face trials of many kinds...." (Jas. 1:2). James doesn't say, *If* you face trials, but rather *whenever* you face them. He quickly adds that we can face trials with joy because God is at work through them to strengthen and deepen our love relationship with him. We don't need to dread our trials or even the greatest test of our faith. God's grace will always be sufficient.

It appears to me that Gethsemane was the hour when Jesus' human will was brought under his most severe testing. There, as he prayed agonizingly to the Father, he affirmed the cross as the will of God, and gained the peace of mind and strength of will to face his arrest and horrifying crucifixion. In the context of his Gethsemane prayer, Jesus warned Peter, James, and John to watch and pray in readiness for their hour of testing when their spirits might be willing but their flesh weak (Matt. 26:41).

Abraham had been tested before, and some tests he had passed, and with others he had faltered. Abraham's faith "chart" showed lapses of faith (Gen. 12:10; 16:1-4; 20:1-18); but his faith nevertheless did make upward progress, by the hand of God. But then, as we see, he came to his severest test, which was untimely, a rude interruption.

A severe test in my life and ministry was fifteen years ago, when crises at the church I was serving resulted in my resignation of a nineteen year pastorate. All my ministry goals and plans were centered in that church, where I fully intended to retire after thirty of so years of service. The events that caught me totally by surprise were both unwelcome and untimely. It was at that point the greatest test of my life, forcing me to evaluate my calling and even my relationship with God. At the age of 57 I found myself asking, "Why now, Lord?"

In the midst of enjoying an international ministry in Brussels, Belgium, our lives were interrupted by my wife's Alzheimer's diagnosis, and the challenges inherent in that dreadful disease. Seeing my wife gradually die a slow and cruel death was a dreadful challenge and test of my Godward love and trust.

God tested Abraham with a demand (child sacrifice) that was a known practice in his time and surrounding culture. In our day, God would not ask us to literally sacrifice a child. Because of a fuller revelation in both the Old and the New Covenant we know that human sacrifice is abhorrent to God and is not his way of working. It was a unique test for Abraham, to sacrifice his "one and only son." Isaac was the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. Isaac's name means "laughter," and when he was born miraculously to 100-year-old Abraham and 90-year-old Sarah, they laughed in delight over the incredible fulfillment of the promise (Gen. 21:1-7).

When he commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, God seemed to be against God (Chrysostom). To Abraham, the promise and commandment of God seemed self-contradictory, and in our time of greatest difficulty, it will seem the light of God's truth will be turned to darkness. In times of testing all we can do is simply trust in God's love. Faith teaches us that, whatever God allows to come our way, he's with us and will turn the random and senseless into something for our good (Rom. 8:28).

Perhaps you face the loss of a job, your marriage or your own health, ageing, or the approach of death, which seem to counter all your hopes and dreams. Life has been rendered absurd by these sudden turns. This story of Abraham's immediate obedience to this extreme, unthinkable command cannot help but move us to pity for Abraham. Imagine the heartbreak and turmoil in his spirit as he trudged up that mountain with his soon-to-be-sacrificed, long-hoped-for son. The demands of God's greatest test will seem unbearable, untimely, and unreasonable.

The great Christian thinker and writer, CS Lewis, was a long-time bachelor, until he met Joy Davidman, who became the love of his life. Shortly she was diagnosed with cancer, and the two were married when she lay in her hospital bed with only a short time to live. Lewis cried out against God for the untimeliness of Joy's death and of the seeming absence of God:

"Meanwhile, where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing Him...you will be—or so it feels—welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become." For the middle-aged CS Lewis, his test of faith seemed unbearable, just as for Abraham and Sarah, losing the delight of their lives.

Perhaps the greatest heroes of the faith are not the miracle workers, but rather are the people who trust God even in the dark night of the soul, during times of contradictory circumstances when human reasoning would say, "Where is God?" Or, "...if God truly does exist, He would not allow such and such to happen, nor would He ask any of His children to do such an unreasonable thing."

By faith Abraham was willing to trust God, despite the untimely, the unreasonable, and the unbearable. Imagine how his heart broke when his son interrupted the silence, asking where the sacrifice was! Scripture tells us Abraham intended to obey, to sacrifice Isaac, trusting against all evidence that the Lord was able to raise him from the dead (Heb.11:17-19). But he didn't know for sure God would do that. In obedience, Abraham grabbed his confused and frightened son, and bound him to the cruel woodpile, and raised his knife to drive it into his heart.

No doubt, as Abraham proceeded up Mt Moriah with Isaac, Satan attacked his mind with thoughts such as, "What kind of God is this that you trust, who would ask you to kill your long-awaited son?" God's design is obvious only to him. Satan's design is for our destruction. And, as we look behind the scenes in Job, we note that in this fallen world, God's purposes of testing are often achieved by the initiative of Satan, who, in the words of Martin Luther, is God's devil. God may permit Satan to bring illness or human tragedy, but only according to God's ultimate will for our growth in faith and a deeper love relationship with him.

The Lord desires and is worthy of the devotion of our hearts, and is jealous when we give him second place to anything or anyone else. The First Commandment is that we have no other gods before him (Ex. 20:3). Perhaps Isaac, the long-hoped-for promised son, had slipped into first place in Abraham's heart. As Bonhoeffer wrote, Jesus alone is to be the Mediator in our lives and nothing must come between him and us, not even our most beloved family members.

How subtly our love for Jesus and our devotion to him can be subordinated by what even appears to be noble care for our families! And the irony is, unless we love Jesus supremely, we'll never be able to love and care for our families as we ought. We don't do our children or anyone a favor when we turn them into idols. Even our religious work can become an idol that relegates our love for Jesus to a secondary place and presents a façade to others. Our worship becomes a mere routine and our religious work is done with hearts far from God (Matt. 15:1-9). God may ask you to put to death your ambition, goals, obsession and personal dreams and even loving plans for your family you have cherished in your heart. Someone wisely said that in the story of Abraham and Isaac, it wasn't Isaac who needed to die, but rather Abraham.

In the spring of 2003, in a time of deep soul searching and crying out to God, I prayed through our Scripture text for today. I told the Lord Jesus I was ready to take a knife to all my dreams and hopes as a pastor, believing that, if God desired me to continue in ministry he could raise a ministry from the dead. I asked Christ to let nothing come between me and him again, and to not let ministry be a substitute for loving and serving God.

The text in Hebrews 11 tells us that the faith of Abraham enabled him to reason with heavenly logic (the Greek word / verb in v. 19 gave rise to the English word "logic"), even though human logic failed him. Perhaps it's only when we stop relying on human logic that we begin to live and think by faith, and begin to understand life from God's perspective.

Abraham, when he offered Isaac as a sacrifice, and obeyed God to the ultimate, saw God more clearly than before, and was made more mature in his faith. Tested faith includes a design from God, whose design is also to refine us. James, reflecting on Abraham's tested faith, says that as a result of Abraham's

obedience he was made more mature in his faith (Jas. 2:22). Peter writes that trials come to us in order to test us, to refine our faith, which is as precious as gold refined in the fire. God is glorified as our faith is proved genuine (1 Pet. 1:7). In our trials Satan's design is to destroy or at least discourage us. But God is at work in our lives to refine us, deepen our love relationship, and make us more fitted for his purposes.

Life's greatest test may seem at the moment nonsensical, but with heavenly logic we can see the hands of the loving Creator and heavenly Father at work to make us more usable to him, more bless-able now, and more reward-able in the eternal kingdom. God raised Abraham that day as a God-pleasing example of faith. Again, it wasn't Isaac who needed to die that day. It was old Abraham who needed to die on Mount Moriah, to be raised a new Abraham. He became that day what describes as a more loving, trusting, and beloved friend of God (Jas. 2:22), which is what God desires us to be (Matt. 22:36-40).

Abraham passed his greatest test. And so may we.