

## **Abraham's Sacrifice (The Greatest Test of All) Genesis 22**

When Michael was born five weeks premature, and I held that little bundle of life in my hands for the first time, I didn't know whether the Lord who had given us a son would take him back again. Although I wasn't quite as old as Abraham, it was the first time I could really identify with him in this passage.

Seventeen years later, Mike is taller, more intelligent and more attractive than me. At the age of 75, Abraham enrolled in the "School of Faith." Now, over 100, he was still having faith-stretching, heart stopping experiences. We are never too old to face new challenges, fight new battles, and learn new truths. When we stop learning, we stop growing; and when we stop growing, we stop living. "The first forty years of life give us the text," wrote Arthur Schopenhauer, "and the next thirty supply the commentary." The "commentary" is being written as we listen to God, as we follow His directions, one day, one challenge, one step at a time. Sad to say, many people understand neither the text nor the commentary, and their lives are ended before they have understood the meaning of life. It often takes an awful tragedy like a rail crash or a close call on the motorway, or some serious air turbulence at 30,000 feet to bring us back to the reality that we are just one step, one second, one breath, one heart beat from eternity.

Genesis 22 records the greatest test that Abraham ever faced. It also helps us see the progressive unfolding of God's rescue mission for planet earth. For it contains a beautiful prefiguring of our Lord Jesus Christ's sacrifice at Calvary. In both, the lesson from this passage is this: *obedient faith overcomes in the trials of life*. I want us to consider five lessons we can draw from the sacrifice of Abraham. We can learn them the hard way or the easy way. Blindly on our own, or with insight and wisdom from God's Word.

### **1. Expect Tests from Almighty God (Genesis 22:1-2)**

"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, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you." (Genesis 22:1-2)

In the "School of Faith" we will inevitably face tests. This is the only way we grow. Do you remember the way your non-Christian friends began to observe your words and actions when they discovered where you had started going on Sundays? They may have joked about it but they were watching you. They may even tested you to see how real your faith was. Would you no longer exaggerate your mileage claim? Were you still late for work? Did you still swear occasionally?

Could they still get you a little tipsy? Did you still join in the gossip? Little tests that you may not have even noticed. Little tests that showed one of two things. Either you had just got religious and were now a self righteous pain in the neck or you had experienced a life changing encounter with Jesus Christ that they didn't have. Abraham had his share of tests from the very beginning. First was the "family test," when he had to leave his home in Ur and step out by faith to go to a new land (11:27-12:5). Then there was the "famine test," which Abraham failed because he doubted God and went down to Egypt for help (12:10-13:4). Abraham passed the "fellowship test" when he gave Lot first choice in using the pastureland (13:5-18). He also passed the "fortune test" when he said no to Sodom's wealth (14:17-24). But he failed the "fatherhood test" when Sarah got impatient with God and suggested that Abraham have a child by Hagar (Gen. 16). When the time came to send Ishmael away, Abraham passed the "farewell test" even though it broke his heart (21:14-21).

Not every difficult experience in life is necessarily a personal test from God. Every experience though, can be either a test or a temptation, or both, depending on how we deal with it. (See James 1:12-16.) Sometimes its our own disobedience that causes the pain or disappointment. Sometimes our hurts are simply a part of normal human life: As we grow older, friends and loved ones move away or die, life changes around us,

and we must make painful adjustments. To stay close to God, we must learn to distinguish between *trials* and *temptations*. Temptations come from our desires within us (James 1:12-16) whereas trials come from the Lord who has a special purpose in them. Temptations are used by the devil to bring out the worst in us, but trials are used by God to bring out the best in us (1:1-6). Temptations seem logical and attractive while trials seem very unreasonable. Why would God give Abraham a son and then ask Abraham to kill him? Perhaps it was because Abraham had not waited for God to give him a son. Having fulfilled that promise, God now wanted to know whether Abraham would trust him, unconditionally, unreservedly. We all face temptations to sin (1 Cor. 10:13), but we don't all experience the same tests of faith. These are tailor-made for each child of God, and every experience is unique. In one sense, it is a compliment when God tests us because it shows he wants to deepen our faith and perhaps use us in a new way. In his book, "The Road Less Travelled, the psychiatrist M. Scott Peck wrote, "Life is difficult. Once we truly know that life is difficult—once we truly understand and accept it—then life is no longer difficult" (*The Road Less Traveled*, p. 15). That is the first lesson we must learn: Expect tests from God, because the Christian life is not easy, but trust Him in and through them. Following Christ and becoming like Him was never meant to be easy, but worth it.

## **2. Focus on Promises not Explanations (Genesis 22:3-5)**

“Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded 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. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. 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.” (Genesis 22:3-5)

“In the commencement of the spiritual life,” wrote French mystic Madame Guyon, “our hardest task is to bear with our neighbour; in its progress, with ourselves; and in its end, with God.” Like Abraham, our faith is not really tested until God asks us to consider what seems unbearable, to do what seems unreasonable, and to expect what seems impossible.

Whether you look at Moses by the Red Sea, David in the cave, Peter by the fire, or Jesus at Calvary, the lesson is the same: We live by promises, not by explanations.

Consider how unreasonable God’s request was. Isaac was Abraham’s only son, and the future of the covenant rested in him. Isaac was a miracle child, the gift of God to Abraham and Sarah in response to their faith. Abraham and Sarah loved Isaac very much and had built their whole future around him. When God asked Abraham to offer his son, He was testing Abraham’s faith, hope, and love. It seemed like God was wiping out everything Abraham and Sarah had lived for.

When God sends a trial to us, our first response is usually, “*Why, Lord?*” and then, “*Why me?*” Right away, we want God to give us explanations. Of course, we know that God has reasons for sending tests—perhaps to purify our faith (1 Peter 1:6-9), or perfect our character (James 1:1-4), or even to protect us from sin (2 Cor. 12:7-10)—but we fail initially to see how these things apply to us. The fact that we ask our Father for explanations is natural but suggests we may not know ourselves as we should or God as we should.

Faith does not demand explanations; faith rests on promises. Read 22:3. Abraham believed God and obeyed Him when he did not know *where* (Heb. 11:8), when he did not know *when* (11:9-10, 13-16), when he did not know *how* (11:11-12), and when he did not know *why* (11:17-19). Two lessons so far: Expect tests from Almighty God. Focus on promises not explanations.

### **3. Depend on God’s Provision (Genesis 22:6-14)**

“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?” Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went on together.” (Genesis 22:7-8)

How do we know Abraham was trusting on God’s promise? Because when Isaac asked where the animal sacrifice was, Abraham replied, “God will provide the lamb.”(Gen. 22:8).

As he climbed Mount Moriah with his son, Abraham was confident that God would meet every need.

On what could Abraham depend? He certainly could not depend on his feelings, for there must have been terrible pain within as he contemplated what God has commanded him.

He loved his only son, but he also loved his God. Nor could Abraham depend on other people. Sarah was at home, and the two servants who accompanied him were back at the camp.

We thank God for friends and family members who can help us carry our burdens, but there are some tests in life that we must face alone. *It is only then that we can see what our Father*

*really can do for us!* Abraham had already experienced the resurrection power of God in his own body (Rom. 4:19-21), so he knew that God could raise Isaac from the dead if that was His plan. Our hope too is based on the resurrection of Jesus.

We can know “the power of His resurrection” (Phil. 3:10) as we face trials in life. When the situation appears hopeless, remind yourself, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13).

God did indeed provide the sacrifice that was needed, and a ram took Isaac’s place on the altar (Gen. 22:13).

Abraham discovered a new name for God—“Jehovah-jireh”—which can be translated “The Lord will see to it” or “The Lord will be seen.” *Where* does the Lord provide our needs?

In the place of His assignment. Abraham was at the right place, so God could meet his needs.

We have no right to expect the provision of God if we are not in the will of God. *When* does God meet our needs? Just when we have the need and not a minute before. When you bring your requests to the throne of grace, God answers with mercy and grace “in time of need” (Heb. 4:16). Sometimes it looks like God waits until the last minute to send help, but that is only from our human point of view. *God is never late.* How does God provide for us? In ways that are usually quite natural.

God did not send an angel with a sacrifice; He simply allowed a ram to get caught in a bush at a time when Abraham needed it and in a place where Abraham could get his hands on it.

All Abraham needed was one animal, so God did not send a flock of sheep. *To whom* does God give His provision?

To those who trust Him and obey His instructions. When we are doing the will of God, we have the right to expect his provision.

“When God’s work is done in God’s way, it will not lack God’s support.” God is not obligated to bless my ideas or my projects, but He will provide for His work if I do it in His way. Three lessons so far... Expect tests from Almighty God. Focus on promises not explanations. Depend on God’s Provision, and fourth,

#### **4. Glorify God in all you do**

If ever two suffering people revealed the glory of God the father and Son, it was Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah.

*Their experience is a picture of the Father and the Son and the cross.* It is one of the most beautiful pictures found anywhere in the Old Testament. Jesus said to the Jews, “Your father, Abraham, rejoiced to see My day; and he saw it, and was glad” (John 8:56). Lets consider what Jesus may have meant.

#### **4.1 The Father and Son acted together**

The moving phrase “and the two of them went on together” is found twice in the narrative (22:6, 8). In our evangelism we often emphasize the Father’s love for lost people (John 3:16) and the sacrifice of Jesus to save us (1 John 3:16), but we don’t always mention that in the gospel we see how the Father and the Son also *love each other*. Jesus Christ is the Father’s “beloved Son” (Matt. 3:17), and the Son said, “But that the world may know that I love the Father” (John 14:31).

Abraham did not withhold his son (Gen. 22:16), and the Father did not spare His Son (Rom. 8:32). They acted together out of love.

#### **4.2 The Son had to die**

Abraham carried a knife and a torch, both instruments of death. The knife would end Isaac’s physical life, and the fire would burn the wood on the altar where his body lay.

In Isaac’s case, a substitute died for him; *but nobody could take the place of Jesus on the cross*. He was the only sacrifice that could finally and completely take away the sins of the world. The answer to the question Isaac asked,

“Where is the lamb?” was given by John the Baptist: “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). The cross was the physical instrument of death; but at Calvary, Jesus experienced much more than death. He experienced the judgment of God for the sins of the world. Isaac felt neither the knife nor the fire, but Jesus felt both. Isaac’s loving father was right there, but Jesus was forsaken by His Father when He became sin for us.

### **4.3 The Son bore the burden of sin**

It is interesting that the wood is mentioned five times in the narrative and that Isaac did not start carrying the wood until he arrived at Mount Moriah. Near Mount Moriah Jesus carried his own wood on which he would lay. Abraham took the wood and “placed it on his son Isaac.” (Gen. 22:6), and “the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:6).

### **4.4 The Son was raised from the dead**

Isaac did not actually die. But “in a figurative sense” (Heb. 11:19) he died and was raised from the dead. Jesus, however, really died, was buried, and was triumphantly resurrected. Abraham had offered Isaac back to God and God gave him back to Abraham, back from the dead. The greatest thing that can happen as we experience the testing God sends is that we grow closer to our Father and become more like the Jesus.

*“Calvary is not only the place where Jesus died for our sins, but it is also the place where He sanctified suffering and, by His resurrection, transformed suffering into glory.”*

So, expect tests from Almighty God. Focus on promises not explanations. Depend on God's Provision, and Glorify God in all you do. Lastly,

### **5. Look forward to all Christ has for you (Genesis 22:14-18)**

“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. The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, “I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son. I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore... through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.” (Genesis 22:14-18)

There is always an “afterward” to the tests of life (Heb. 12:11; 1 Peter 5:10), because God never wastes suffering. God blessed Abraham because of his obedient faith. To begin with, he received *a new approval from God* (Gen. 22:12). He obeyed God's will and sought to please God's heart, and God commended him. God gave Abraham *new assurances* (Gen. 22:15-18). He had heard these promises about the future before, but now they took on fresh meaning. Abraham also learned a *new name for God* (22:14). Jehovah-jireh means “the Lord will provide” or “the Lord will see to it.” May you also know God as Jehovah-jireh this week.

Let's pray...

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