

A Test Across Time

Text: Genesis 22:1-18 for 2/18/2018 by Pastor Bolwerk

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 time¹⁶ 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."

This is a test. This test started back when God first called Abraham to leave the country where he lived and go to a foreign country. To help build trust in Abraham's heart God made promises to Abraham. God promised that land Abraham was going to would one day belong to his descendants. God promised Abraham he and Sarah would have a son, and he promised that the world would be blessed through that son.

For the next 25 years Abraham struggled through this first test, sometimes trusting God, and sometimes not. Yet through it all God kept protecting Abraham, he kept saving Abraham, and kept repeating again and again his promises until finally Abraham was given that son through whom God would fulfill his promises.

But this test spans across time. God calls Abraham again, and as he does God sets before him the next test. God tells Abraham, "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" (v. 2). We can only imagine how this must have left Abraham's head full of questions. Is God serious? Does God really want me to sacrifice my son Isaac? God had said that through this son I and the world would be blessed! Now God wants me to make him a burnt offering? That means my son would be totally burned up; there would be nothing left of him!

We could certainly understand if Abraham hesitated in fulfilling this test. But if he had doubts in his mind we certainly don't see that in his actions. We are told, "Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey" (v. 3). Abraham doesn't procrastinate; instead he simply packs up and goes: Two servants, one son, and enough wood to burn up the sacrifice.

Even though Abraham left right away it would still take 3 days to get to Mt. Moriah. That's a

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lot of time to think about what God has asked him to do. Again we would not be surprised if Abraham had second thoughts, yet we don't see it in his actions. When they arrive at Mt. Moriah he tells his servants to wait with the donkey. Abraham says **"We will worship and then we will come back to you"** (v. 5). 'We' will come back? Was Abraham just trying to keep Isaac in the dark, or did he really believe this?

Now the hardest part of the journey begins. Abraham puts the wood on the back of his own son to be carried up the mountain. As father and son make the final trek to the top Isaac asks a simple yet painful question. **"The fire and wood are here,"** Isaac said, **"but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"** (v. 7). We hear a surprising response from Abraham: **"God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son"** (v. 8). After that there was only silence between them.

When they reach the spot on the top of the mountain Abraham builds an altar, and arranges the wood on it. Then he binds Isaac and puts him on the altar on top of the wood. Then Abraham reaches for the knife. Abraham was completely willing to go through with it; he did not hold back. Where did this trust, this faith, come from? All Abraham had to go on were God's promises and God's track record. God had been able to create life from Abraham and Sarah's 'dead' bodies. If God could do that he certainly had the power to create life from pile of ashes.

Look at what Abraham was trusting in: nothing but promises. Then look at what God asked Abraham to do. Now, look at yourself. Look at what you are trusting in. What has God asked you to do? How does that compare to what God asked Abraham to do? Have we been as willing as Abraham to carry out what God has asked of us?

In your entire lifetime, has God ever asked you to do anything anywhere near as difficult as what he asked Abraham to do? If we're honest we would have to say, 'No.' How have we typically responded to God when he tests our faith? Whining? Making excuses? Maybe we've tried explaining away God's clear commands. God commands us to love him above all things. How many things in this life have we loved more than God? God tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves. How often do we love our neighbor only when it's convenient? Instead of doing what God has asked us to do, so often we have done what we have wanted to do. Then we act as if somehow impenitent sin could claim a place before the sinless Creator.

The God who spoke to Abraham is the same God who speaks to us, but where does it get him? It must seem like talking to a wall. Forget being asked to sacrifice our children on an altar, we have been unwilling to do things that are a thousand times easier to obey. God asks us to keep his Sabbath holy by gathering to worship him. God asks us to honor those he puts in authority over us. He wants us to help care for others bodies and possessions, and not use our words to hurt others. How do we respond to these tests? We complain that God's "tests" are too hard, too unrealistic, too demanding, too outdated, too inflexible, or just too much trouble for us. Make no mistake: God's commands are not up for debate. Abraham in simple faith did not question what God had asked of him. So, when we question or ignore what God asks us to do, what does that say about us?

And the test continues. As Abraham reaches out with the knife to complete what God has asked of him God calls out to Abraham and tells him not to harm his son. This exercise of faith has strengthened Abraham. So God fulfills what Abraham had prophesied earlier: God provides a sacrifice; a substitute for Abraham's son. And in joy and gratitude to God for sparing his son's life Abraham sacrifices a ram in place of his son. Then God does something very special, he repeats his great promise to Abraham: **"Through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed"** (v. 18).

This was only a test. And this test is a shadow; it's a picture of a future test. You see God does not ask anything of his people that he himself is not willing to do. So God planned a test, and this test God himself would take.

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God called his one and only Son, the Son he loves, to take a trip. God's Son did not travel to Mt. Moriah. Instead, he came into this world to live under God's law. And God's Son was tested. He was tested by Satan for forty days in the desert, facing one temptation after another. He was tested by the people of Israel to become an earthly king with earthly power and fame. God's Son was tested by the religious leaders of his day to bend God's law as they had done, to serve their own desires. Jesus, God's Son, never failed a single test. He did everything God asked of him. He kept all of God's laws perfectly.

But there was one final test, and it involved offering a sacrifice to God. Like Abraham's son, the wood for the offering is placed on God's Son to be carried up a mountain; carried up that hill called Golgotha. As we see him go up that hill we may ask, 'Where is the lamb for the sacrifice?' The answer: God himself will provide the Lamb.

And there at the top of the hill the wood is arranged and the Son is laid on top of the wood to be sacrificed. But this time as the hand was raised to carry out the execution there is no call to stop; there is no one there to intervene. Blow after blow is struck upon the victim until the blood flows running down over the wood. And being lifted up for all to see, there he is, the sinless Lamb of God sacrificed on an altar of wood. We may wonder why there is no substitute to take the place of God's Son. What we need to realize he is the substitute. He's our substitute.

This is not a burnt offering made by fire. Instead it is a sacrifice of the soul. The Lamb is tormented and in anguish as he is separated from his loving, heavenly Father. That's what hell is: It is total separation from God and his love. Not even an unbeliever can fully understand this because as long as a person is alive they have some exposure to God's love. God allows the sun to shine on the good and the bad; he allows the rain to fall on the righteous and the wicked. God cares for all people while they are alive, blessing them with time of grace in which they can come to faith in him. He sends his Word out to the ends of the earth as he works to bring salvation to all people.

But as Jesus hung on the cross here on this earth, the sinless Son of God suffered hell. God the Father separated himself from his Son as his Son hung bleeding and dying under the suffocating weight of the world's sins. Our sins are there too. Those sins of apathy toward God's commands. Those sins of questioning and excuses and self-justification. They were all there slowing squeezing the life out of the Sacrifice. That bloody wooden altar should have been ours. But the One who was sacrificed is our Substitute, exchanging our sinfulness for his innocent holiness. With the words "It is finished," the test was complete, and so was the promise.

With Jesus' death God's promise to Abraham was fulfilled. The world has been blessed with the forgiveness of sins through Abraham's promised Descendant. That blessing carries across time to us. We enjoy God's peace and forgiveness because Jesus finished the test for us.

When it comes to trusting God all we have ever had to go on are God's promises and his track record. God has kept all his promises. God's track record is perfect. That which our faith rests upon, that which our faith trusts in, is perfect. It is absolutely rock solid, for God himself has finished the test for us.

So when you are faced with the tests of this life, then let the altar of Jesus' cross remind you that you will find nothing more certain in this world than God's promises. God will never ask more of you than he himself can provide. And God will never provide less to you than what is right and best for your eternal life. Amen.