The Ultimate Test

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Genesis 22:1-14

Sermon Series:
A Journey of Faith –
A Study on the Life of Abraham

God tests Abraham to see how much he has learned over the last 25 years.

Taking tests has become a way of life in today’s world. We take all sorts of tests: personality tests, college entrance tests, blood tests, pregnancy tests, driving tests, IQ tests, drug tests, fitness tests, you name it. Much of what we learn these days is measured by test-taking.

In recent years, scientists have mapped the 20,000 genes that comprise our body’s DNA. The human genome project is good news for the treatment of disease. The bad news is that there is no gene for test-taking.

Well over half of all adults indicate that they don’t like to take tests. Some people experience test anxiety. The very thought of a test causes them panic. Parents will tell me, “My child doesn’t test well. My son (or daughter) has no difficulty learning the material, but when he takes the test his mind goes blank.”

There are lots of remedies put forward to help people improve their test scores. I read one study recently that determined that drinking milk before a test increases brain power. Another study claims that gum chewing before an exam increases test results. The act of chewing activates blood to the brain, which enhances memory.

We take tests to determine what we have learned. Our Scripture lesson opens with the words, “God tested Abraham” (Genesis 22:1). God tests Abraham to see how much he has learned over the last 25 years.

For the past two months, we have been on a journey with Abraham. God came to Abraham in Genesis 12 and promised him a son (12:2-3). Abraham’s descendents will one day be as numerous as stars in the nighttime sky (15:5-6).

For a quarter century, Abraham and Sarah have waited for this promise to come true. It’s a struggle for them to believe the promise. There are times when they take matters into their own hands to move the process along, which only further complicates the story.

Finally, their son, Isaac, is born in Genesis 21. At long last we can close the book on Abraham and Sarah. Their story has a happy-ever-after ending. Their long-awaited son has now arrived!

But God comes to Abraham to deliver the fateful news: “Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love and go to
Abraham is willing to trust God even when his life doesn’t make sense.

the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering” (22:2). Each of these three phrases in succession, “your son, your only son, whom you love,” hits for Abraham a little closer to home.

Genesis 22 is one of the most well-known and confusing passages in Scripture. Is this the kind of God we want to be associated with—a God who asks for infanticide? What kind of God would ask someone to do this?

Earlier in Genesis, Abraham bargained with God over the fate of Sodom. “What if there are 50…45…40…30…20…10 righteous people living in Sodom? Will you take down the righteous with the wicked?” (18:23-32). If Abraham is willing to go toe-to-toe with God over the residents of Sodom, surely you’d expect push back over Isaac’s destiny. There isn’t. He offers no pleading or bargaining here. He simply does as he is told.

They travel three days to Mt. Moriah. Not a word of conversation is recorded between father and son. I wonder what they discussed along the way? When they arrive at their destination, Isaac breaks the silence with a logical question. He’s old enough to carry wood but young enough to ask a childlike question, “Father, the fire and wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” (22:7). Surely Abraham answers with a lump in his throat, “God will provide” (22:8).

Our narrative now slows to a crawl; everything unfolds in slow motion. Abraham builds an altar, stacks the wood, binds Isaac and places him on the altar (22:9). He draws a knife from his robe and raises his hand to do the unthinkable. Suddenly, a voice penetrates the stillness: “Abraham, Abraham, do not lay your hand on your 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” (22:11-12).

You can exhale now. Abraham has passed the ultimate test with flying colors. The Hebrew word for test refers to metals that prove their strength through testing. Just as we subject metals to extreme conditions to prove their worth, so Abraham is willing to trust God even when his life doesn’t make sense.

Abraham calls this place, “The Lord will provide” (22:14). Abraham’s earlier answer to Isaac’s question about a lamb wasn’t a ruse after all. Abraham has learned his lesson well. God will provide.

I have considerable empathy for Abraham. I identify with his dilemma. I shudder to think of what I would have done in his place. What would I do if God asked me to do this?

I’ve preached on this passage countless times. I’ve talked again and again about Abra-
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ham’s willingness to give up what is most important to him.

What is more important to us than God? Is it our jobs, family, leisure or recreational pursuits, our status or money? Am I willing to surrender it to God? There is considerable merit to this real-life application. But this week, I became convinced something else is going on here.

I came across an article this week written by Nancy Guthrie. Nancy and her husband, Dave, had two children born with Zellweger syndrome. It’s a rare neurological disorder for which there is no cure. Nearly all children who have this syndrome die within six months. Their two children, Hope and Gabriel, died from this disease in the first year of life. She has written several books about loss and grief, including *Holding on to Hope*.

She wrote an article entitled, “How could God ask that?” She writes about leading a Sunday School class in her church on Genesis 22. A man in the class said, “I have always struggled with this story. I just can’t understand how God could ask Abraham to do that. It just seems so cruel.”

She answered his question the best she could. Later, she reflected more deeply on his question, “Why would God ask Abraham to offer his son as a sacrifice? Is God trying to teach us that we should be will-

ing to sacrifice what is most precious to us? No. This story is not recorded to inspire sacrifice to God. Instead, it paints in vivid colors the sacrifice of God. The point of this story is not to convince you that you must be willing to sacrifice to God what is most precious to you, but rather to prepare you to take in the magnitude of the gift when you see that God was willing to sacrifice what was most precious to him—his own beloved Son—for you.”

She concludes her essay with the words, “If we read the Bible assuming that we are expected to follow in the footsteps of those who are featured in its pages, we will find ourselves always trying harder to sacrifice and obey, but never measuring up. We’ll assume that God asks us to do things that will make us miserable just to put us through a test of our allegiance, diminishing, rather than magnifying God in our hearts. But when we read the Bible recognizing that it is not about what we must do for him, but about what he has done for us through Christ, rather than being offended by what we fear he may ask of us, we find rest in what he has done for us.”

I’m struck by her words, “It is not about what we must do for him, but what he has done for us through Christ.” Don’t obsess over what we must do for God. Rest in the thought of what God has done for you.
God commended Abraham’s faith in verse 12: “Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, Isaac, from me.” These words mirror God’s initial words of command to Abraham in verse 2: “Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love.” Abraham isn’t alone in his only-son status. John writes in his gospel, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whosoever believes in him may not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

So what difference does this sermon make in my life. Two things come to mind. You may be new to this church or have been coming here a long time, but are just now awakening to a desire for Christ in your life. Take the next step. Open your life to Christ. Pray with me as I am speaking: “Dear Jesus, I want you in my life. I open the door of my heart to you. I ask you to forgive my sin and lead me in the way everlasting.”

Second, commit these three little words to memory, God will provide. Post them in your office, your bathroom mirror or refrigerator door or car dashboard. “God will provide.”

Abraham doesn’t call this place “Abraham Shama” or “Abraham obeyed.” He doesn’t draw attention to his role in the story. He calls it “Jehovah Jireh” or “God will provide.” God provides a surrogate ram for Isaac, just as God provides a surrogate for us, Jesus Christ: “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29).

“Don’t worry about your life,” Jesus tells his followers. Look at the birds of the air. If God provides for them, will he not care for you?” (Matthew 6:25-34).

You may be feeling swamped right now. You are awash in self-doubt or flooded with decisions about the future. Your mantra this week is the verse, “God will provide.” The Lord is my provider.

The Protestant reformer Martin Luther and his wife, Katherine, made it a daily practice to read Scripture to each other. If you are in a relationship right now where you are struggling to connect spiritually, you might want to adopt this habit of reading Scripture to engage in spiritual conversation together. Martin happened to be reading to Katy Abraham’s story of being asked to sacrifice his son, his only son, to God. Katy asked, “How would a loving God ask Abraham to sacrifice his only son?” “Why Katy,” Martin said, “He did it himself. God did sacrifice his only Son for us.”

God never asks us to do anything he is unwilling to do himself. God sacrificed his only Son for us. Rest in what God has done for you.