

God Tests Abraham  
(Genesis 22)

This is the story about God asked Abraham to offer up his son Isaac as a burnt offering.

It starts like this: *Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied.* That's Genesis 22:1.

God tested Abraham. Why would God test Abraham? Why would God test any one of his children?

I do not really know the "why" underneath this all, but I do know that tests are a common part of being a child of God.

In James 1, James says *Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, when you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces all kinds of good things in you.*

James assumes that God's children will have many different kinds of trials. These are all tests for our faith, and these tests produce good things in us. James says we'd celebrate if we knew all our tests did for us.

1 Peter 1 also talks about *suffering grief in all kinds of tests*, which come so that our faith can be proved genuine.

So there are all kinds of tests, different kinds of tests, for God's children. If you've been a follower of Jesus more than six months, you can be sure that you've already been tested. It's probably happening right now. But not quite like Abraham.

Abraham and his wife Sarah couldn't have children. When Abraham was 75, and Sarah 65, they had never had children, too late for Sarah to have children, *then* God promised that they would have a child. God did not rush into making the promise, or keeping it.

Twenty-five years after the promise, when Abraham was 100 and Sarah 90, Sarah gave birth for the first time, to a son named Isaac. *Some time later*, our story begins. Isaac is old enough to carry a bundle of wood, but still not an adult.

*Some time later God tested Abraham. God called, Abraham answered, and 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.*

Offer as a burnt offering – that means to slaughter him, kill him with a knife, and burn the body as an offering to God.

Early the next morning, Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. What was that night like for Abraham? The Scripture says nothing about what Abraham felt. Abraham said not a word. Only silence. And no putting it off – early next morning he began.

Abraham set out with two servants, one donkey loaded with wood, and his son Isaac. There must have been food, too, and a tent and some bedding. But we don't read about that, only about the wood for the burnt offering.

On the third day Abraham can see the spot. God said earlier that he would tell Abraham which mountain in Moriah, and that must have happened, but we don't read about that. But Abraham can see the spot up ahead on the third day, and he knows that's the spot.

There is a conversation at this point. Abraham tells the two servants to stay with the donkey. *Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.*

*We will come back to you.* Why does Abraham say *we* will come back to you? Is he just afraid to say the truth? I do not know why Abraham says *we*, but that's what he says.

Then Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering off the donkey, and put it on Isaac's back to carry. Abraham himself took the fire and the knife. They did not have matches or bic lighters, so they carried coals in a pan of some kind.

We don't read about the knife before this, but now we find out about the knife. Of course, there has to be a knife. Abraham now has everything he needs to offer Isaac as a burnt offering.

After Abraham and Isaac leave the servants, and walk a bit, Isaac speaks to his father Abraham. In the Bible, it does not say Isaac spoke to Abraham. It says Isaac spoke to his father Abraham. He said, "Father?"

"Yes, my son?" Abraham answered. "The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" That was the right question.

Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." That answer does not quite satisfy me, but it satisfied Isaac, and they walked on.

I'll read what happens next just as the Bible tells it.

*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. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.*

"He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar." When the Bible tells a story, it is always lean. No extra detail at all, lots of things omitted. It only says what we have to know. "He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar."

Abraham had more along than just fire and knife and wood. He also had rope, to tie up Isaac. Did Isaac struggle? Did Abraham have to force this? We're missing either a conversation, where Abraham explains to Isaac, or we're missing a struggle, or both.

It is possible that Isaac did not struggle. The Bible does not say. *He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.*

We are told about the hand reaching out, and the knife, detail all of a sudden, so that we will know that Abraham is going through with this.

*But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!"*

*"Here I am," he replied.* (That's exactly what he said at the start, when God decided to test Abraham, and called him.) *"Here I am," he replied.*

*"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."*

*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.*

There are a couple of epilogues to this story, which we'll get to, but that's the basic story. I find this a disturbing story. Marilyn and I had two or three conversations about whether or not I should do this. It seemed too heavy and dark to do in the summer, somehow.

We decided to go through with this story, but it is still a distressing story. I think it is distressing for two reasons. One is that sacrificing children is horrible; no one even wants to think about it.

Two, in spite of this, God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son. Can we trust such a God, and put ourselves in his hands? We know that at the last minute God stopped Abraham from going through with it, but still, three awful days for Abraham.

I think that's why I find this story dark and unpleasant. But it is in the Bible, so we need to know it.

Why this test? Child sacrifice was an ongoing practice in the ancient world. There were ancient gods that sometimes asked that of their people. The OT mentions it a few times, and always condemns it with strong language. Leviticus does this, and so does Jeremiah, and those two writings are seven or eight hundred years apart.

In Jeremiah 7 God says: "The people of Judah burn their sons and daughters in the fire, something I did not command nor did it enter my mind." This line pictures God evaluating what he would ask his people to do.

God decided not to ask some things, but to ask some other things of his people. But sacrificing their own children? That was not even under consideration. God did not command that, and it did not even enter his mind.

Somewhere the dark side invented this. Sacrifice comes from God, but some evil power took it as far as sacrificing children. It was happening thousands of years ago, and I'm not sure it's over yet.

God did tell Abraham to do this. I suspect, and this is just Ed's guess, that God wants to be able to say to the dark powers behind these other gods, "My people are as devoted to me as yours are to you. They would do this if I asked it."

I don't know if this is part of why God asked this of Abraham, but I think it might be.

There's another side to this, though. Put yourself in the place of someone who worships a god that asks for this. You've seen this happen, maybe it happened to one of your brothers or sisters, maybe you're a parent that's done this to your own child.

And we can assume, beyond any doubt, that such people have read this story or heard this story. Assume you're one of them. When you hear this story, it's "normal." You probably don't like it, but it is no dark surprise that Abraham's God wants this.

For you, the surprise comes at the end, when God stops Abraham, when God won't let Abraham go through with it. Imagine how that would feel. Abraham's God stops it, won't let it happen.

For you, this is a wonderful story, kind and full of light, because this God does *not* want the child sacrificed. This God is delighted at the willingness, and wants also to save the child's life. Such people have heard this story, and we should hear it through their ears.

Abraham was not always this good. Abraham passed this most difficult test with flying colours. I cannot imagine a harder test, and I cannot imagine anyone doing any better at it than Abraham.

Don't forget, though, that Abraham failed some other tests as gloriously as he passed this one. When Abraham was 99, God told him that within one year Sarah would bear him a child.

Shortly after that Abraham traveled into another region, and told them that Sarah was his sister, so that the king would take Sarah as his wife without killing Abraham. Abraham supported a lie and gave his wife away peacefully, to make sure he would not be killed, even after God had said that Sarah would bear the promised child within a year.

And when that king asked Abraham why Abraham told the lie about his wife, Abraham said that he and Sarah had always done this, every time they went into a new region.

Abraham's life is a mix of remarkable lack of faith and remarkable faith.

God blessed Abraham. There are lots of stories about Abraham in Genesis. When Abraham failed to trust God, God said nothing. No comment from God.

And whenever Abraham trusted God, like he did here with Isaac, God promised to bless Abraham, because Abraham obeyed.

Listen to his epilogue from Genesis 22: *I swear (says God) 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 sea.*

*Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.*

When Abraham failed to trust God, God said nothing, and when Abraham obeyed, he got blessing like this, as God's response to his obedience. There is something huge and important about our God in that pattern.

God offered his only Son, and no one stopped God. For several weeks this story about Abraham has been like a magnet pulling on me. One of the reasons is that this awful thing that God asked Abraham to do, to sacrifice his one and only son, God himself did.

In Acts 2, when Peter preaches on the day of Pentecost, he says this: *This man Jesus was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge.* God sacrificed his son.

At the beginning of Genesis 22 God says this to Abraham: *Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love.* When Jesus was baptized, God said, *You are my son, whom I love.*

In John 3 we read, *God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son.*

We read how Jesus struggled in the Garden of Gethsemane, not wanting to go to the cross, but we don't read about what it was like for the Father to insist on Jesus going to the cross.

For me, Genesis 22 gives a bit of a window into how this looks from the father's side. Even Genesis 22 is not a sentimental story at all, it is stark and lean and terse, nothing at all about how Abraham felt.

But the story is still told only from Abraham's side, not Isaac's or Sarah's, and in that way it invites us to look at Abraham, and then at God, and to realize that God did what God asked Abraham to do, and no one stopped God at the end. God went through with it.

The LORD will provide. After Abraham sacrificed the ram that he found caught by its horns, we read this: *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."*

This was a test for Abraham. Remember the opening line: *Some time later God tested Abraham.*

When it was over, Abraham had learned something about what happens when God tests people. The Lord provides. “The LORD will provide.” “On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided.” All tests occur “on the mountain of the LORD.”

What will be provided? It does not say. There is a blank there. The point is not what God will provide. The point is that God provides. When there is a test, God provides.

Abraham may have been counting on this all the way along. Somehow, God will provide. In any case, this was Abraham’s conclusion, when the test was over. God will provide. It will be provided.

When God gives a test, which he still does, all the time, he does not leave people on their own. He provides. When and what we do not know. But he does provide.

Abraham’s test was something he had a choice about. He could do what God said, or not. We get tests like this too, times when we know what we should do, and for whatever reason it is a very difficult thing to do.

We also get tests where we have no choice. Something bad comes to us, and we just have to cope with it. That’s how Job was tested. He had no choice about the things that happened to him. Or did he?

Job did have a choice: will he keep trusting and honouring God, or will he walk away from God? Job’s tests were designed to make him turn away from God, turn away from the Rescuer who would not rescue. About that, Job did have a choice.

All tests have a choice in them, boiling down to whether or not keep trusting God and living his way.

They are hard. That’s why they are called tests. But God provides. We’re not on our own. He gives the test, but he also provides. We won’t keep following God without our own choice and effort, but it also won’t happen without God providing, God working in us to will, and to do, what pleases him. Amen.