

God Tests Abraham

Genesis 22

Genesis 22 begins, “Some time later God tested Abraham.” That line tells us what question to ask: “Will Abraham pass the test?” “Some time later God tested Abraham.” Will Abraham pass the test? We don’t know yet what the test is, and we are curious, but the Scripture tells us the important question right at the beginning.

Two pieces of background before we go farther. One, child sacrifice was around for most of the OT time period. We should probably assume that Abraham knows of this. He knows that some gods want people to sacrifice their own children. Although it is horrible to us, Abraham likely knew of it in his time.

Two, just before this in Genesis, Abraham lost his older son. Sarah said, “Get rid that slave woman and her son.” Abraham was very upset about this, but God said, “do what she wants.” So early the next morning, Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael on their way. So in Genesis 22, Abraham is down to one son.

God tested Abraham. God said, *Abraham!* Abraham said, *I’m here.* God said, *Take your son, your only son, whom you love – Isaac – and go to Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on the mountain I will show you.*

“Your only son” reminds us that Abraham used to have two sons, but he doesn’t any more, now he only has one. “Your only son, whom you love.” Our doubting minds say that when God tests us, he can’t possibly know how hard this is for us. “Your only son, whom you love,” tells us that God does know how hard this will be for Abraham.

Early the next morning, Abraham got up. That is exactly what Abraham did when God said, “Do what Sarah wants, send away Hagar and your son Ishmael.” Early the next morning, Abraham got up and sent them away. Here, God said, “Sacrifice your son Isaac,” and early the next morning Abraham got up to do this.

One of the remarkable things about this story in Genesis 22 is what it does not say. Very few conversations, and no feelings or thoughts at all. What does Abraham think or feel? What does he say to Sarah? It is not said.

The story cares about one thing. Will he do it or not? Will Abraham obey, or not? Abraham has to be horrified. We are horrified, just reading 4000 year old story about a different parent and child. What frightens me about this story is that Abraham’s God is also my God. How can God even ask this? This story knows that this will disturb us. But still, the question is, will Abraham obey?

Early the next morning, Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two servants and Isaac. After all was ready, he cut the fire wood for the offering. Not the most sensible order of events. Was he putting off cutting firewood? Was his mind a little jumbled? Don't know.

On the third day of walking, Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. What does that look like to Abraham? No comment. Figure it out. There are no words for some things.

He told the servants, "stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will go worship, and we will come back." "WE will come back"? Was Abraham having doubts? Or was he just hiding the real plan? He certainly did hide the real plan. Or does he hope God will get involved in some way? Maybe all of these.

Isaac took the wood, and Abraham took the fire and the knife, and they carried on alone. The knife. Yuck. We don't read how old Isaac was at this time. He's called a boy, a lad. Ishmael was called that when Isaac was weaned, and he was in his middle teens. Isaac is probably about the same. He's old enough to walk for three days, and carry a load of wood up to the top.

Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father." Abraham said, "I'm here, my son." Isaac asked, "The fire and the wood are here, but where's the lamb?"

Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." Abraham cannot speak to Isaac without adding, "my son." "God himself will provide, my son." Is that just a pious smokescreen? It is a smokescreen, hiding the truth, but we should also take it as some real faith in God. Whatever happens, it has to be God providing.

In some ways, this test by God goes after trouble Abraham had in the past. 40 years earlier, God told Abraham clearly that God would make of him a great nation. Right after that, Abraham went to Egypt, and was afraid Pharaoh would kill him because of his wife. Abraham has no children. God has to keep him alive until he's had children, to make a nation from him.

But Abraham did not trust God to do what God had just said about making a nation of him. Fear made him do something else, that got Sarah in trouble, and Pharaoh into trouble, and Abraham himself. And years later, that whole story repeated itself. When he got scared, Abraham did not believe God would do what he said.

Now it is about his son Isaac. Twice God has told Abraham that the blessing and the promises will come through Isaac. The great nation will come through Isaac. Both times, Gen 17 and Gen 21, God mentioned Isaac by name. And now God wants Abraham to slaughter Isaac, offer him as a sacrifice. And God has said, two times, the blessing and promise come through Isaac.

Abraham knows that in the past, when he did *not* trust God, that caused all kinds of troubles. God had the matter in hand those times, and Abraham doubted, and bad things happened. This time, Abraham does not want to do that.

He would rather die himself than offer his son Isaac. But this time, his own life is not on the line, it's Isaac's life. But Abraham has doubted God in the past, and taken his own way out, and it did not go well. Not again, says Abraham to himself. This time, he will trust God and obey him.

God will provide. I suspect that Abraham has no idea what will happen on the mountain. He will do his part. How will he do his part, and Isaac will still be the chosen heir? He does not know. I'm sure he has many doubts. But the only way Abraham can put this in God's hands, is to pick up the knife with his own hand.

When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built the altar, and laid the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.

Somewhere there must have been a conversation between Abraham and Isaac, but we do not read it. It becomes clear Abraham bound Isaac and laid him on the altar, *with Isaac's consent*. Isaac is old enough to walk three days, and carry a good load of wood up a high hill. It is hard to imagine that he could not run away from Abraham. He could evade Abraham.

If he was resisting, it would have been much easier for Abraham to have attacked him with the knife and gotten it over with. It is much harder to tie someone up with rope than take their life with a knife. Even then, hands and feet tied, he could wiggle off the altar. He laid him on the altar. Isaac lay there. Isaac agreed to this.

But that's not mentioned. That conversation is not recorded, nor Isaac's agreement. Why? Because the story is not about that. The story is about God testing Abraham. What will Abraham do? Not what does he say, or think, or feel. We can guess most of that. What will he do?

So Abraham is just doing the next thing. He watches his own hands build an altar, then his hands arrange the wood. Then his hands take rope, and bind his son. Then he picks up Isaac in his arms and lays him on the wood.

The rabbis thought long and hard about this story. They called it "the Akeba," which is Hebrew for "the binding." They did not have Genesis divided into chapters, so they had a name for each story, and this one is "The Binding."

After he binds his son and lays him on the altar, he reaches out his hand and takes the knife. The unthinkable is about to happen. Isaac lies there waiting, but the angel of the LORD can't wait any longer: "Abraham, Abraham!"

Abraham says, "I'm here." That's how he answered God at the beginning of the story, and how answered Isaac who wanted to know where the lamb was, and it is again Abraham's answer: "I'm here."

“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 held back your son, your only son, from me.” “Now I know that you fear God, because you have not held back your son, your only son, from me.”

Abraham looked around, and there was a ram, caught by its horns in the bushes. Just happened to be one right there. He took the ram, and offered it in the place of his son Isaac. Abraham called that place, “The LORD will Provide.” Which tells us that when Abraham told Isaac that the Lord would provide, it was at least in part a genuine faith.

Then the angel of the Lord speaks again. The angel of the Lord often speaks as if the angel itself is God. No one knows quite what to make of that, but that’s how it is.

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. 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. (Gen 22:16-18)

God says, “you had one descendant, and you put that one in my hands, trusted me entirely with that one. Here’s what I will do with that one descendant. Your descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky, and the sand on the shore. Your descendants will take over the cities of their enemies. Your descendants will bring my blessing to all the nations on earth. Why? Why do I most solemnly promise to do this, and bind myself to do this? Because you obeyed me.”

This promise covers the blessing God gave Abraham at the beginning of Gen 12, when this all started, but it is more lavish. God’s language is stronger in how much he will do, and God’s language is stronger in the solemn oath: “*I swear by myself, declares YHWH.*”

The first blessing was free and undeserved. “Leave your father’s household, go where I show you, and I’ll bless you in all these ways.” But now after this, God makes the promise even bigger, *and* he puts it in permanent concrete. He takes an oath. Why? “Because you did this Abraham, you did not withhold your son, because you obeyed me.”

Abraham has had a long faith journey, and there have been lapses of true devotion to God. Abraham has been erratic, sometimes showing faith, and sometimes not. Genesis shows us all of that, and brings Abraham’s faith to this triumphant conclusion. Abraham was torn between his love for his son, and his devotion to God. It is indescribable. And he obeyed.

In other places in Genesis, and Exodus and beyond, the OT speaks of God promising Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, with an oath. This is the oath, God’s solemn promise after Abraham laid Isaac on the altar and picked up the knife. This is the only oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Let's talk about Jesus, and then we'll talk about testing. When Jesus was baptized, the voice from heaven said, "you are my son, whom I love." God told Abraham, "take your son, whom you love." Now Jesus is the loved son. But the words of God at Jesus' baptism are enough like God's to Abraham about Isaac, that Jesus will get it. Maybe not immediately, but before long.

God was telling Jesus, "you will be my Isaac son, I will sacrifice you as an offering." God used the same words again on the mountain of transfiguration. That happened soon after Jesus started telling the disciples that he had to be rejected and killed, and would rise the third day. The disciples did not like that very much. They wanted a different kingdom. So God told them, "This is my son, whom I love. This is my Isaac Son. I will sacrifice him. You listen to him!"

There is something else here. The story of Abraham offering Isaac disturbs me because my God apparently can ask someone to do that. It scares me that God can even ask. How could he put Abraham through such a horrible experience? Do I even want a God like that?

But Genesis 22 is the only picture we get, in the whole Bible, of what it was like for God to lead Jesus of Nazareth to the cross. I don't like the story because of what God put Abraham through. But by the time we have read the Gospels, we know that God put himself through this, and no one called out at the end to say he didn't have to finish. God finished, used the knife.

We gone through this imagining what Abraham felt. Good. Can't avoid that. Now, put all that on God, without the rescue at the end. The Bible is silent on God's distress. The silent Father. The closest we will get is to read Genesis 22. And even that is silent about Abraham's inner response.

Testing. Let's talk about testing. The story opened, God tested Abraham. Jesus, too. Right after Jesus of Nazareth was baptized by John, and filled with the Spirit, the Spirit led him into the wilderness to be tested.

Jesus came back, and not long after this, he taught his followers to pray, "Our Father in heaven, don't lead us into testing. Pray to the Father that what happened to me does not happen to you." And we do pray for that, but it still happens.

Right at the start of his letter, James the Lord's brother says, "Count it all joy, my brothers and sisters, when you meet the many kinds of *tests*, because this produces *endurance*, and that in turn will make you *complete*. It will fill in what you *lack*."

Peter starts the same way. "We were all saved into hope," says Peter, "a living hope. We have an inheritance that is kept by God, and we ourselves are kept by God for the day of Christ, so we rejoice in all this, even though, for a little while now, we have to suffer grief in all kinds of *tests*. These come to prove the genuineness of your faith." And so on.

(All of these have the same Greek word, *peirasmos*.)

Pray that God will not lead us into testing, but the apostles assumed it would happen to us all in many different ways. Passing the test means continue in the basics. Will I still trust God? Will I still serve God? Will I live in his ways? Will I still treat people kindly?

Sometimes we talk as if we are supposed to *learn* something from our trials and suffering. We do learn from them, but in the Bible, we are not called to learn something, nor to figure out the lesson God is teaching. That is not how the Bible speaks of tests and troubles.

James says that the suffering of our tests and trouble produces endurance. Later, in James 5, he gives examples of patience in the face of suffering, the prophets, and Job. Patience, in the sense of perseverance, and endurance, is what we're after.

In the Col 1 prayer that I used last week, Paul prays that the church would be strengthened with all power, according to God's glorious might. What happens to us, when we are strengthened with all God's great power and glorious might? "So that you might have great endurance, and patience, and give thanks to God who has brought us into the kingdom of the Son loves."

When God really rolls up his sleeves and pours out his power on us, we have great endurance and patience, and we keep giving thanks. That's what tests require, for us to keep trusting God, and serving, and worshipping.

Abraham could have said, "Sacrifice Isaac? That makes no sense at all. This time God is asking too much. If this is what God asks of me, I am finished. I cannot do this. God asks too much."

Most of our tests are not so dramatic. They are trials that make us lose interest in trusting God and serving him, and in being kind and generous with others. Passing the test means to keep trusting and serving God. Fight the fight, run the race, keep the faith. Amen.

PRAYER: O God, I am dismayed at how much you asked of Abraham. It frightens me that you could even ask it. Our Father, don't lead us into tests that are anything like that. But you did ask him, and he trusted you and obeyed. And we, here, today, are still getting the benefits of the blessing that came because he obeyed you fully.

And God, you did this for us with your Son Jesus. You bound Jesus of Nazareth, and laid him on the altar, and used the knife and finished the job. It was horrible. And you did this because you wanted people just like us here to be in your family, you wanted us to be gathered around you forever. Thank you. To the One on the Throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honour and honour and glory and might, forever and ever.

We pray that our whole church would be strengthened with all your great power, your glorious might, so that we will have great endurance, and patience, in our tests and troubles, and that we will never stop giving thanks to you, Father, you have brought us into the kingdom of the Son you love so much. Equip us with everything good for doing your will, O God, and work in us what pleases you. Thank you for giving us such prayers and such hope.

BENEDICTION: May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement, and good hope, encourage our hearts, and strengthen us, in every good deed and word. May the God who calls us be faithful and do it. Amen. Go in God's peace, to love and serve the Lord.