
God Testing His People

Genesis 22:1-19

Many of you remember your school days with fondness and warmth. Others, with frustration and humiliation. At the center of some of these memories are tests. Most good schools and teachers test their students to determine what they know and what they can do, that is, their level of proficiency in the subject. My father, as a professor of theological subjects, loved to give multiple choice tests: a, b, c, d, etc. But, he terrorized his students with every question also having (e) all of the above (f) none of the above (g) a and b (h) c and d. I had a teacher in college who, on test days, handed us blue test booklets, wrote 5 questions on the board and we were to choose 3 of the questions to answer in full. While I enjoyed these kinds of tests, most of my friends in the class loathed them.

Being tested is a normal part of life. At each point in Marine Basic Training, our son Nathan has been tested. At key points, he could not move on until he qualified. Many of us have had that experience on our jobs. We want to be accepted in a job or move up to a new level in our job. In order to do so, we have to take a qualification exam or even have certain certifications. Several of us here are certified Biblical counselors having passed a Theological and Counseling Exam to be accredited by the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors.

So it should not surprise us then that God tests His people. The opening verse of Genesis 22 says, "After these things God tested Abraham." We are put on notice right away that this chapter is about being tested by God. In the New Testament, James exhorts us also with these words, "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." (James 1:2-4)

The difficult thing about God's testing is that it is rarely academic. It is not about what you know: the depth and breadth of your Biblical or theological knowledge. God's testing is in the midst of the mess - it is hands on kind of stuff. It is like boot camp qualifications - full pack, rifle, run, hit the wall, crawl through the mud all when it is hot, you are tired, lonely, being yelled at and knowing that what is next is worse! No wonder James says to count it joy when tested because no testing is joyful in itself.

Know this, you will be tested by God. James does not say, "if" as though it is a mere possibility. He says "when" indicating it is a sure certainty. So, how do we not just survive testing, but actually thrive and succeed in it?

Abraham shows us the way.

God's People are Tested through Sacrifice (v.1-2)

In a very simple but powerful way, God initiates the test.

22 After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ²He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."

It Calls for Obedience

The test calls for Abraham to obey. He must hear what God commands and do it. God is clear in what Abraham must do. He is to take Isaac and sacrifice him to the Lord. We are not talking about the kind of use of the word sacrifice that we generally do where it is painful but rarely deadly. This is a command to kill his son because God has said to.

Now look, we can get into all the argument about whether human sacrifice is wrong and whether Abraham ought to have argued with God over ethics. Please understand what I am about to say. God is free to decide what is right and what is wrong. Human sacrifice is forbidden generally yet in this one case is commanded by God. Then it is committed by God when God the Father sacrifices His only begotten Son for our sins. So don't get tangled up in theological or ethical problems here. Face the simple fact that God is testing Abraham's faith, his believing obedience by commanding him to sacrifice his son.

It Exposes the Heart

God says that this test is a heart exposing test. Isaac is identified as both the son of the promise and the son Abraham loves. So this test is designed to take what is deep in Abraham's heart and bring it up to the surface. How? By the way in which Abraham responds. What Abraham believes and desires will be shown by what he does in response to this command.

This is what God is doing when He tests you. He may test you by bringing a hard command to bear on your life. He may test you through the heat of difficult hardship. He may test you by allowing someone to sin against you. These tests will expose what is going on in your heart.

It Tests What is Loved

This test is aimed at Abraham's faith, love and hope.

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What does Abraham actually believe? Is this son and this boy alone the promised one? What words will run through his heart when he hears this command? How will he work it out so that he can desire to do what God has required?

It is aimed at his love.

This is the boy he loves greatly. Will he love God more? Will he turn Isaac into an idol? Will he desire the good thing of a promised son so much that he will disobey to keep that son alive? Or will his faith inform his love so that he will trust God implicitly and obey God immediately?

It is aimed at his hope.

What are Abraham's expectations? Where is his hope? Will he hope first in God? Or will he put all his hope in Isaac? Will his faith in God and love for God orient his heart so that his hope follows the real trajectory of God's promises and purposes?

God is testing your faith, love and hope. Of these three, the greatest is love. So, is there an Isaac you have at the center of your love? Do you love anything more than God? If God said, "Give this up," what would you say no to?

God's People Obey by Faith (v.3-10)

Abraham obeys by faith. He sets out to do what God has told him. What we see in Abraham's response is the kind of obedience we ought to have when tested. Here are three important characteristics of tested faith.

³ So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. ⁴ On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. ⁵ Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you." ⁶ And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. ⁷ And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" ⁸ Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together.

It is a Practical Obedience (v.3)

Moses records that Abraham gets up early and begins immediate preparations for the trip. Presumably, God's command has come during the night hours. He not only obeys but gets up early to do so. His obedience is unquestioning and immediate.

His obedience is also very practical. He knows that where he is to go will be about a 50-mile journey from Beersheba to Mt. Moriah. He then makes lots of practical preparations. He saddles up a donkey. He cuts firewood and takes a brazier with hot coals. He brings along two young men, presumably as both assistants and as bodyguards. He thinks ahead so that he will be able to complete what God has commanded.

Now you have to stop and think about this for a moment. He has had to send Ishmael away in the weeks and months earlier. He is now going to have to sacrifice his son, his promised and much-loved boy. Yet, the Bible gives us no hint of emotional turmoil, psychological pain, resistance or even questioning. How can he do this? When you are asked to do the hard stuff, isn't it easy to drag your feet; prepare, but not completely; sort of leave something out so it will fail? Aren't we quick to question, to argue, to resist, to grumble even as we "obey"?

It is a Persevering Obedience (v.4-8)

James says that a tested faith produces steadfastness. It will produce an obedience that is deliberate and persistent. Here is a persevering obedience on Abraham's part. He has a three day and night journey, the last day of which would have taken him past the future site of Bethlehem and up the hillside to the mountain on which the city of Jerusalem and the Temple would later be built. He had to keep on going. He has a lot of time to think about it. He has a lot of time to chatter with Isaac. He has a lot of time to hesitate and turn back.

That Abraham is obeying by faith is evident from verse 5. He tells the servants to stay at the foot of Mt. Moriah. He says that he and the boy will go on up the mountain to worship and will return. Many translations say, "We will go... We will return." Say what? How can he say

this? He is marching toward putting him on an altar to slay him. On what basis then does he think they are both coming back?

Abraham not only knows Isaac is the heir, he believes it. The author of Hebrews tells us the following, "By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, 'Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.' He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. (Hebrews 11:17-19, ESV) So, he is going to obey, and God will have to raise Isaac up. He believes this in such a way that he perseveres in practical obedience.

Then, you have the wonderful, artless question from Isaac all designed to show us Abraham's stunning faith. "Hey Dad, knife, wood, fire - where's the lamb?" Abraham does not say, "You are." Abraham says, "God will provide for Himself a lamb." We are starting to move into the center of the story with this statement. This test of obedience for Abraham teaches Israel and all God's people an important lesson: God will provide the lamb and will do so for Himself.

It is a Perfect Obedience (v.9-10)

⁹When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son.

The scene here is almost too hard to imagine. He builds the altar. He lays the wood. He puts the knife nearby. He ties his boy. He lays him down on the altar, like he has many a lamb before. He takes out his knife. He raises it, ready to strike. His faith in God, love for God and hope in God impels him to a perfect, a complete obedience. He is poised to go all the way.

What about you? What is the test like for you? Is your faith, love and hope in God move you to practical preparation, pressing through difficulties all the way to total and complete obedience to God?

God's People Trust God (v.11-14)

¹¹But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." ¹²He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." ¹³And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. ¹⁴So Abraham called the name of that place, "The LORD will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided."

The Angel of the Lord in the voice of God reaches out and grabs the wrist of Abraham to stop the descending blow. He calls out Abraham's name and the test is done. God's people obey God when they trust:

In the Greatness of God (v.11-12)

God now affirms that the purpose of the test has been met. It is now evident that Abraham is willing to sacrifice anything, including his son, to God. He does so because he fears God. If I can put that phrase this way: Abraham trusts in the greatness of God. True, holy, fear of God

both trembles and trusts. A real, inner conviction of the greatness, majesty, sovereignty of God causes believing hearts to tremble lest they disobey and trust so that they do.

Ah, maybe part of the reason Abraham's obedience seems so foreign to us lies right here. We believe in the greatness of God. We believe in such a way that we might even rest in it. But we often do not believe it in such a way that we tremble under it. We had better have a respectful awe of such a glorious and grand God. We need to so elevate Him in our thinking that such a sacrifice makes holy sense to us. Nothing should be withheld from such Greatness.

In the Character of God (v.13-14)

God then points Abraham to the ram in the thicket. Abraham gathers it up, takes his son off the altar and worships God through offering it instead of his son. He names the place, Yahweh-Jireh, God will provide. Abraham has trusted the character of God. He has believed that God is one who will provide. He will provide his son and heir. He will provide if he sacrifices his son. He will provide a lamb. This is how he has obeyed. He knows His God so well that He just rests in Who God is and does what God requires.

So, do we? Will we? Do we know God so well that when hard sacrifices are required we simply move in trusting obedience? When we ought to obey a hard command of the Bible, do we then think through who God is, what He has promised, how He has moved for the good of His people and glory of His Name? Or do we fidget with doubt and disobey?

I am going to be pointedly personal in taking this into the realm where we all live. This is not about God speaking to you over something you treasure as though the response to this message is to have a Mt. Moriah here tonight and everyone bring in something that is valuable to you to give to God to show you get it! You and I should be hearing this message over the commonplace things that God requires and yet we don't do. We don't do them because we do not fear Him and we do not trust Him. If we cannot obey God in the ordinary duties of being a Christian, what will we do if asked to surrender in an extraordinary requirement? What about your obedience in loving your family, in parenting your children? What about believing God in an obeying way in your relationships with Christians, in serving God, in faithful stewardship and giving? What about obeying God in helping others and serving others?

So, will you count it all joy when you have trials and tests so that your obedience, even a sacrificial obedience, will result in steadfastness?

God's People Receive Hope-Giving Assurance (v.15-19)

¹⁵ And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven ¹⁶ and said, "By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, ¹⁸ and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice." ¹⁹ So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba. And Abraham lived at Beersheba.

God is pleased to not just give Abraham His approval, but also to affirm His promises. God declares again, over Isaac, His great purposes and promises for Abraham and His heirs. God's people receive hope-giving assurance:

From the Word of God (v.15-18)

While Abraham is hearing this directly through the voice of God, we hear these kinds of approvals and affirmations through the Word of God. Yes, we hear what God promises and purposes with the affect that we have assurance and hope. In the midst of and coming out of testing, God is so pleased so often to bring sweet assurance and peace in your heart.

For a Confidence in God (v.19)

Abraham returns with his son and servants. And for the first time, we are told that he lives, not sojourns, in Beersheba. The nomadic wandering designed to claim the land is now largely ended. He settles down in Beersheba. God's hope-giving assurance brings a serene confidence in God.

Reflect and Respond

So, how do we navigate through this so that the net of truth yields a rich crop of application?

First, have you ever asked yourself, "How do Old Testament believers sacrifice animals and yet don't trust in that animal's blood for their redemption? How do they know that the sacrifice of the lamb represents something larger and later?" This chapter is the answer. Here, a son is brought to sacrifice. God provides a substitute, a ram in the place of a son. So all the lambs, rams, calves, pigeons sacrificed are *in the place of a son until the true Son comes*. Until the greater Isaac comes, until Jesus the Lamb of God is presented, sacrifices are offered in believing faith that God will forgive sins. God will provide Himself a lamb. He did. He provided Jesus, the Son of God, as the final sacrifice. He suffered the descending blow of the wrath of God so that we who believe may go free.

How is your obedience? Is it immediate, practical, persistent in the face of obstacles and complete? Or are you filled with doubt, hesitation, resistance and thus, with disobedience?

Will you surrender to God so that you will sacrifice what God requires? Do you fear Him in His awesome greatness and rest in that greatness as well? Will you with fierce love and faithful trust obey God regardless?

Take inventory. Weigh the character and caliber of your walk with God.

So, we face this individually. We also face this corporately. Will we surrender to God as a church when God requires us to give away a treasure we prize?