

## Grace that Provides

*Grace from the Patriarchs*

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Happy Father's Day. What a marvelous time of worship and celebration and reflection we've already had. Now to introduce what we're going to study from the Scripture today, let me just ask you this: can you think of a time in your life where the Lord tested the genuineness of your faith? Maybe it's something that's happening right now. Maybe it's something that happened long ago but can you think of an occurrence where your faith was being tested? And then also this: how did you do in the test? How did you do in the test?

When Chris and I were in seminary, we were living on a shoestring budget, for sure. I was able to graduate from Bible College with no debt primarily because of some jobs that the Lord gave me by his grace but I was barely in college able to stay ahead of the tuition guy. Do you remember those days? But by God's grace, I did. Then we were married. The summer after college graduation we immediately went up to Grace Seminary near Warsaw, Indiana and enrolled in seminary. Chris got a job at the school which provided a 50% off tuition benefit as part of her job and we were really glad for that. I washed dishes at the local hospital in the evenings and on the weekends during the school year and then built pools during the summer. We bought a trailer to live in and the plan was to try to get through that three year seminary program in 2 ½ years and then sell that trailer and off we would go into the ministry.

Well, by God's grace, we made it through the program in 2 ½ years and during my last semester, a church in New Jersey contacted us and asked if right after classes were done we'd load up and head out to New Jersey. They were asking me to become their assistant pastor and also the administrator of their Christian school. We thought about that. We prayed about that and what was especially inviting to us was because it was on the east coast I could continue my education at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia with a degree in biblical counseling. So it just seemed to fit and so we decided that we would do that. Well, of course, the job was going to be in Christian education which meant my starting salary as the administrator of that school was \$15,000 a year but we believed that's what God wanted us to do so things were falling into place. It was tight but it would work out if we found really inexpensive housing once we moved to New Jersey and also if we were able to sell that trailer that fall. So we put it on the market and it didn't sell and it didn't sell and it didn't sell. I wish I could stand before you this morning and say that I

joyfully trusted the Lord anyway and I led my young wife by being a model of faith and belief and confidence during that test. I'm sure I fell short many times. Way too much worry. Way too much doubt. Way too much complaining.

We only had one car at the time and when the semester had finished in December, I was home packing up some of our stuff and then I went to pick Chris up on her last day of work at the school. Our trailer was out in the country; there wasn't a whole lot of traffic. Anyway, I'm driving away from the trailer and I notice another car coming toward me and out of the corner of my eye I recognize the person driving. It was our realtor and there was a young couple with her. Sure enough, within hours, our trailer was sold. We're on our way to New Jersey. We had just enough to sustain us through the next part of that adventure but, honestly, that afternoon was both a blessing and also a rebuke to me because I thought about all the time that I had spent worrying and all the time I had spent doubting and stewing and complaining, time wasted from trusting and delighting in the faithfulness of God. I was being tested and way too often I was failing the test. Well, this morning we're going to study a father who had a far more significant test than mine but by the grace of God he passed it in amazing ways.

With that in mind, open your Bible now to Genesis 22. Genesis 22, that's on page 15 of the front section of the Bible under the chair in front of you if you need that this morning. So Genesis 22 or page 15 of the front section of the Bible under the chair in front of you.

This summer we're doing a series entitled "Grace from the Patriarchs" from the book of Genesis. We're thinking especially about selected stories from the lives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, the four great patriarchs of this book and we're looking for lessons that enhance our overall theme this year of "Finding Grace." What can we learn from the successes and even the failures of those who have gone before us? Well, by now you're certainly familiar with the threefold provision of the Abrahamic covenant, right? I could ask anybody here to stand and before you'd even remember your name you could tell me the threefold provision of the Abrahamic covenant.

Let's think about that for a minute. In the preceding chapters, the covenant is given in Genesis 12 but in the preceding chapters we had the fall of man, the worldwide flood and then the Tower of Babel. So think your way through the book, by the time you get to the end of Genesis 11, you honestly wonder if there is any hope for human beings who have been made in the image and likeness of God and given the command and the privilege to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth as visible representatives of his marvelous character and deeds. You also wonder by the time you get to the end of Genesis 11 how God is going to relate to sin-cursed man and his seeming inability to choose to love God and live to please him.

Well, you find the answer to all of that in this pivotal chapter, Genesis 12, which we've referred to now several times where God comes to a man named Abram and he makes a set of promises to him. That's the answer to both of those key questions. He make a set of promises to him focused on land and seed and blessing. So even though Abram and his wife Sarai were advanced in years as the Bible so graciously puts it, they didn't have any

children at the time, God promised to make of them a great nation and to give them a land in which to dwell and to bless their descendants so that they, in turn, would be a blessing to the nations. And Abram's place in the equation was to do what? It was to believe. It was to exercise his faith. He was to believe God's promises and begin acting on them which is why it is so delightful to read this brief summary of what he did in Genesis 12:4, "So Abram went forth as the LORD had spoken to him." He believed the promises of God. Do you have any examples of that this week in your life? "Abram went forth as the LORD had spoken to him."

Many of you are reading through the book of Genesis in tandem to this study. I encourage you to do that. You've also been trying to learn some of the key places in the New Testament where Abraham's life is referenced. Two of those key places are Romans 4:3 and 16 where Paul says, "For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.' For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace." That's a crucial juxtaposition for what we're emphasizing this year. "For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of," who? "Of us all." Then this great text in the book of Hebrews, "By faith," that's what it's all about, believing and acting on the promises of God even when you're being tested by faith, "Abraham when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise." It's all about the promises of God. "As in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God." Don't you love that?

Now, by the time we get to our chapter this morning, Genesis 22, the covenant has been formalized; Pastor Aucoin explained all of that last week. Abram's name has been changed now to Abraham, from the father of many to the father of many nations. This man has had some amazing victories. He's had some stunning lapses. But most importantly God kept his promise regarding their son. He does that, you know. He does. In the verses preceding the ones we're going to study this morning, "Then the LORD took note of Sarah as He had said." Don't you love that? Do you know the Lord took note of you a bunch this week? Did you know that? Keeping his promises. "Then the LORD took note of Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had promised." He does that too. "So Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the appointed time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore to him, Isaac." Wow. Wow. I bet it's going to be nothing but smooth sailing from here on out, huh? Let's see about that.

Genesis 22, beginning in verse 1, "Now it came about after these things, that God," what? "Tested Abraham, and said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.' So Abraham rose early in the morning," did you hear that? "And saddled his donkey, and

took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place," note that emphasis of going to the place, going to the place, going to the place, "of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from a distance. Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go over there; and we will worship and,'" plural verb in the original text, "'we will return to you.' Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and he," listen to this, "he laid it on Isaac his son, and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, 'My father!' And he said, 'Here I am, my son.' And he said, 'Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?' Abraham said," what? "'God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.' So the two of them walked on together. Then they came to the place of which God had told him," the place, the place, the place, "and Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood, and bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, 'Abraham, Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.' He said, 'Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God.'" I wonder if the Lord had any occasions to conclude that about us this week? "'Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.' Then Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns," surprise, surprise, surprise, huh? "And Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up for a burnt offering in the place of his son. Abraham called the name of that place The LORD Will Provide, as it is said to this day, 'In the mount of the LORD it will be provided.' Then the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, 'By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.' So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham lived at Beersheba."

Don't you love the word of God? You think a human being could have come up with that story? We're talking this morning about grace that provides. It does. Grace that provides and with the time we have remaining, let's think about three principles to help us trust God's promises. Anybody here need a little help with that during the test you're currently facing? Three principles to help us trust God's promises and obey God's word even when it is incredibly hard, even if that's right now.

It starts right here, friends: understand that sometimes God tests the genuineness of our faith. In fact, I would encourage you during our time together just to have a running list in the back of your mind of the ways your faith may be currently being tested and maybe they are big examples, maybe they're just little examples but I would also encourage you to be talking to God. You realize, the Holy Spirit is here right now, don't you? The most important person in this room is the one who is not seen but I would encourage you to be

asking him to help you carefully apply this chapter to what is specifically happening in your life right now.

Now, no question about the grammar of the text: God tested Abraham. So you understand that sometimes God tests the genuineness of our faith. God tested Abraham. Now, we have to understand that and balance with passages like James 1:13 where James affirms, "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone." What does that mean? Well, it means there's a dramatic difference theologically between enticing someone to evil, God never does that, and providing an opportunity for the genuineness of your faith be on display in some sort of unusual fashion. Obviously, the latter is what is occurring right here.

Now, you might say, "Well, why would God do that? Why would God do that to Abraham? Why would God do that to anyone? Why would God do that to me?" Well, a lot of answers to that question including because it provides an opportunity for his strength and his power to be illustrated in real time. You see, ultimately this chapter is not about the wonderfulness of Abraham; this chapter is about the wonderfulness of Abraham's God and often that's especially demonstrable not when everything is easy and pleasant but when everything is...do you even want to think about it this morning? Even when it's hard. When it is challenging. When you're being tested.

Also, God allows things like this in Abraham's life in order to bolster his faith for the days ahead. Do you think this is going to be the last test Abraham was ever going to face? And what is the best way to become confident for the final exam, assuming that's the hardest one? What's the best way to get prepared for that? You ace the three previous ones throughout the course of the semester, just like you did in your college days. You see, Abraham will never have reason to again question whether God can or will provide for his obedient children. Will he ever again? The nature and the results of this test will never be forgotten.

It's also a powerful example to others. That's why Paul said in Romans 15:4, "Whatever was written in earlier times," like this, "was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance," is that the way you're handling your test right now? "And the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." Isn't that what we've just seen in South Carolina this week after this horrendous murder of nine persons in an historic black church in Charleston? What did the family members do? What did the family members say during that murderers arraignment? Listen in.

First Female Speaker: I forgive you. You took something very precious away from me. I will never talk to her, never again. I will never be able to hold her again but I forgive you.

Male Speaker: You know, I forgive you. My family forgives you but we would like you to take this opportunity to repent. Repent. Confess. Give your life to the One who matters the most, Christ.

Second Female Speaker: We welcomed you Wednesday night in our Bible study with open arms and you have killed some of the most beautiful people that I have known. Every fiber in my body hurts but as we said in Bible study, we enjoyed you. May God have mercy on you.

That's faith in action, friends. Those dear people just preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the entire world. Do you realize that video has gone viral and it should have? The power of God on display right there as men and women pass the test.

Now, go back to our text. What else can we learn about this test of Abraham? Sometimes it involves our greatest treasures. It just does. Let's be honest with this passage of Scripture this morning. Authenticity is the only way to know God, huh? "Take now your son." The Christian life means acknowledging God's lordship over everything that we have. Is that true? For a long time, members of our church, what's the first principle of biblical stewardship? God owns everything. You own nothing. Affirmed in places like Psalm 50, "'For every beast of the forest is Mine," God says. "The cattle on a thousand hills. "I know every bird of the mountains, And everything that moves in the field is Mine. "If I were hungry I would not tell you, For the world is Mine, and all it contains." Are you imagining it this morning? "Take now your son." In some cases involving our exclusive treasures. "Take now your only son." Abraham had been childless all these years and then he waited 25 years. Do you realize that? 25 years for the promise to be fulfilled, "his only son." Involving our cherished treasures. "Your only son whom you love." Can you imagine how much Abraham and Sarah must have loved this boy? Don't sugar-coat this. And in ways we can't see the outcome in advance. "Go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you." You see, it's not like the Lord says, "But it's going to be okay. I'll stop you at the end. Here's the end of the story in advance."

Now, on the other hand, Abraham did have some very specific promises not just concerning his descendants but particularly concerning Isaac and his place in the fulfillment of the covenant. We read about that in the previous chapter where God had said, "Through Isaac your descendants shall be named." Well, how in the world do you put all of this together? And is it acceptable to say, "I'll obey God if and when I can see how all of this is going to work out in advance"? What's the answer to that, my friends? Of course not. There's no faith in that. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." And I believe that Abraham believed that even if he took the life of his own son in obedience to God's command that God was powerful enough to raise his son from the dead so that his son Isaac could be used in the specific fulfillment of this promise which is why he said to his servant, "We are going to go worship and we," plural verb, "we are going to return."

Now, back to you: how is God testing your faith right now? And how are you doing on the test? You know, we have families in our church whose son or daughter came to them and said, "Dad, Mom, I think God may be calling me to serve him on the mission field and so we'll be home once every four years or so and we're going to miss a lot of our

family events and your grandchildren are going to grow up apart from you in a different country and the place that God is leading us is a lot more dangerous than the US." And fathers and mothers in our church have faced that test and they have handled it successfully.

We have plenty of dads around here who have to face the test of living by biblical priorities and what that means is work can't be their god so they're going to push away from their desk at a reasonable time of the day and they're going to head home with the time and the energy left to raise their children in the nurture and the admonition of Christ and then they're going to have to trust God for the advancement of their career and the provision for their families. Their faith is being tested sometimes by a boss who wants the job to be their god and they are successfully passing that test.

Vacation Bible school is coming up next week. You know that God has called you to be an ambassador for Christ and I'm talking to you. Not somebody else, I'm talking to you. God has called you to be an ambassador for Christ and he's given you specific promises in his word about that and there is somebody in the very next cubicle to you. Do you know who I'm talking about? There is somebody right there on your same cul-de-sac and you know you ought to seize the opportunity to invite their children and maybe even to offer to carpool them over night after night this week but there is this matter of your reputation. There is this matter of what other people might think about you. Friend, your faith is being tested. How are you doing on the test? How are you doing on the test? And do you like a God who tests it?

Now, what do we see next in the passage? God is pleased when his people do their part in passing his test. Is that true? There is a clear emphasis in this passage on the relationship between God's sovereignty and human responsibility, what God does and what we're to do. How did Abraham handle that? Well, he obeyed right away. I don't think it's just an ancillary detail when we read, "Abraham rose up early in the morning and he saddled his donkey." Some of us are pretty good at spiritual dawdling, do you know what I mean? Shuffling our feet all day long instead of getting at it. Not Abraham. He split the wood. Did you notice that in the text? He split the wood for the burnt offering. How would you even do that? Every stroke of that ax coming closer to the sacrifice of your son. By the way, have you been thinking about the cross this morning? I mean, unless you question God's goodness in even designing this test, there are few clearer pictures in the Bible of the sacrifice of our Messiah, huh? Only in that case there was no one to stay the hand of God's just judgment for the sins of man. This sacrificial wood we're studying in Genesis 22 is pointing to a future tree that's going to be formed in the shape of a cross.

He split the wood himself and then he went to the approved place. It's interesting to me that this is mentioned three times in this text: verse 3, he arose and went to the place; verse 4, Abraham raised his eyes and he saw the place; verse 9, then they came to the place. So often obedience involves going somewhere or many times I think, staying somewhere. It's specific. It involves doing particular things at particular locations at particular times.

Then he opened that mug of his and it wasn't with complaining. That happens during the test sometimes, huh? No, he wasn't complaining. He wasn't whining. He was testifying just like those dear people in Charleston did. He testified to the servants. "Abraham said to his young men, 'Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go over there; and we will worship,'" that's what we're going to be doing and then, again, plural verb, "and we will return to you." That's a promise from me because I have a promise from God.

Then he placed the wood on Isaac's back. Imagine that. And do you see the point of all these details? That's called passing the test. Not sitting around waiting for God to do what you can do yourself by faith.

Then these incredible words: he carried the fire and the knife. Can you imagine two heavier burdens to carry than that? Then that leads Isaac to a question after the two of them walked on together. Isaac spoke to his father, "My father," and he said, "Here I am," and Isaac said, "Behold the fire and the wood but where is the lamb? Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Don't you wish you had the video of that moment? Don't you have to believe that Abraham was choking back tears when his son asked that question?

So he testified to Isaac. You talk about happy Father's day, here it is: "Abraham said, 'God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.'" Way to go, dad. Way to pass that test. Happy Father's day. Then a second time, the two of them, they walked on together. You know, this isn't the same Abraham who earlier had instructed his wife to twice lie about her true identity. There is some hope in that text, by the way. If you would say, "I keep failing tests and failing tests and failing tests and failing tests." So did Abraham and God matured this man's faith right before our very eyes and what he did for him he stands ready to do for us.

Then he built the altar and arranged it just like God instructed. "Then they came to the place of which God had told him; and Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood, and bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood." By the way and I'm making this argument from silence but it would appear that this part of the story says as much about Isaac as it does about Abraham. If my daddy came up with that hot mess of a plan, the only way it was going to happen is if he could outrun me. No evidence of resistance. No evidence of resistance at this part of the story at all.

Then the Bible affirms he "stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his own son." Doing exactly what God told him to do, exactly how God told him to do it and doing it right away. That's what a man who was made in the image of God is supposed to look like. You see, that is the intended impact of the marvelous promises of God. That's being a visible representation of our invisible God. He did his part in passing the test through the transforming power of God's grace.

Now, I would just ask you: are there steps that God wants you to take by faith that up to this moment you have not been willing to take? And the good news is I have the privilege of seeing people do what Abraham did all the time, in other words, being willing to do their part. For example, men and women saying, "I know Christ died on the cross for me.



I know it's time for me to do my part. I know it's time for me to do exactly what those dear persons in Charleston, South Carolina instructed, now the entire world to do, to repent. To acknowledge my need of a Savior. To admit that there is a ransom for my sin that I cannot pay myself. Then to set up a time to talk to somebody about that and get it settled. We've had a significant number of people do that this year and if you're one of those persons who has made that decision since last Father's day, you had the Gospel, God did his part, for sure, you had people loving on you and living it, you had people loving on you and speaking it to you and then you were willing to admit your sin and place your faith and trust in Christ. That's why Paul said in the verse I read to you earlier, "For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace," you can't earn it, "so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all." And if you're one of those persons, praise God that you chose to do your part.

I know of men and women who were suffering in some way or who were just stuck: they were estranged from a spouse; they were estranged from somebody; they knew they needed to communicate; they knew they needed to get it solved. They were at an impasse and so they decided, "We're going to get some help. God has given us his sufficient word, now it's time for us to do our part. We're going to schedule an appointment with somebody and we're going to find out how to break this logjam." That's Abraham-like faith. That's doing your part.

This church is filled with people who generously and sacrificially give week after week after week. Why? So the Gospel can be powerfully and brightly proclaimed around this community and around this world and that puts you in a vulnerable position for sure. Taking God at his word. Living by faith. Then when an opportunity comes up like did a couple of weeks ago for someone like Matt H. and me to run over to Albania and check out a ministry opportunity there like we're running down the street to check out a car, on the plane we go. By the way, that church in Albania asked me to convey to you their great thanks for making that opportunity possible. They are so excited about all that God is doing and all that God may do in this partnership that we're developing together. Well, how in the world could we jet off to Tirana? It's because the funds were there in order for us to participate in the great thrill of worldwide missions.

You see, friend, how is God testing you right now? And are you taking the steps of obedience that you ought to be taking? And if you would say, "Well, you know, honestly Pastor Viars, I'm kind of dragging my feet. I've been delaying my obedience. I've got an incredible number of excuses in my situation to not do what I'm supposed to be doing." Well, is it possible that at the core it's a question about whether God is really capable to provide? Is that really what it comes down to? And isn't that the final lesson of this passage? God provides all the strength, all the grace, all the resources to help us pass tests successfully.

This text affirms Abraham's obedience revealed the genuineness of his faith. "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God." Can you imagine the emotional release of Abraham at that moment? Can you

imagine the emotional release of Isaac at that moment? Can you picture the emotional impact of God the Father who was overseeing these events? Knowing the day will come when he will offer completely his own Son? Paul affirmed, "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all." The Lord says to Abraham, "Now I know that you fear Me." All kinds of tests. All sorts of sizes. Giving you an opportunity to show your love, your adoration for your God and the joyfulness with which you fulfill whatever test he gives.

Think about all these people who will be serving in vacation Bible school this week. That opportunity presented itself. There was the test and you passed the test. Here's what I would encourage you this week: when you're flying out of work and you're flying by one of those burger joints to grab a stale burger and some greasy fries and then running down state road 26 in order to get here on time, you're cramming that hot mess in your mouth but at the same time, you're tired, you've got a million things to do at home: your grass has grown, blah, blah, blah. But in the back of your mind you're humming the VBS tunes from the previous night and you can't wait to get over to the church house because you're hoping for another opportunity to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to the young people of this town. I hope in the back of your mind you'll think this: God is saying to you, "Now I know you fear Me. Now I know you love Me." Thank you for passing the test. You have not withheld your convenience. You have not withheld your energy. You have not withheld your time. You have not withheld your reputation.

It revealed the genuineness of his faith. Then we also see this: God's timing is always perfect, isn't it? "Then Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns." I think one of the most important words in that verse is the word "then." Not before. Not long after. Right then. Can we respectfully say this morning that God has a flair for the dramatic? Isn't it true God is never late but he is seldom early? You see, it was in Abraham's best interest now and in the future for the events to be sequenced in this particular way.

You know, when I saw a realtor coming in her car with those perspective buyers for our trailer on Chris's last day of work, one of my responses was just to smile and I said something to the Lord like, "Okay, you got me. Touche." Are you supposed to say that to God? "Touche. Forgive me for my lack of trust. Please help me never make that mistake again." I'll tell you, that lesson, that failed test in many ways, that served me very well over the years.

Tests successfully passed can be a lifelong reminder of God's ability to graciously provide. That's the way the text ends. "Then the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, 'By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have.'

Now, I think I would be remiss if I did not end this message by asking you an admittedly hard question. Obviously it ended really well on this particular day. Does the story always end this way on that particular day in this life? Or does God sometimes make the test even harder than this and provide grace and strength for pain that will only be relieved in eternity? We're so thankful for our children and we're thankful especially for our two son-in-laws. I've said and I mean it, I'd give my right arm for either one of those guys. Rob and Austin, incredible blessings. Some of you have met Bethany's husband Rob. He's such a gift to our family in so many ways. A fabulous husband to our daughter. A sensitive father to our grandson.

My son-in-law Rob's parents had three sons themselves: Aaron, then Rob and then Nate. I'd like you to hear about the test that God brought into their family's life and how God helped them handle it.

Hello, my name is Tom S. I bought and read the Bible for the first time in my life when I was 21 years old. Shortly thereafter, I became a follower of Jesus Christ. My wife, Connie, shortly thereafter became a Christ follower as well. That was back in 1980. Together we began our faith journey and since that time, we have experienced many good times and many bad times, some joys and sorrows and everything in between. In every one of those situations we have found him to be faithful, every present and near.

Two such occasions that come to my mind is when we were first married. The doctors had informed us that my wife Connie's chances of having children were very slim so, of course, we committed that to the Lord and trusted and believed that he would provide for us, of course, because that's what we desired and he provided us through his wonderful love and sovereignty and grace three wonderful boys: Aaron Thomas, Timothy Robert and Nathaniel Lee. To say the least, we were overjoyed at each birth for God's wonderful grace in how he provided for us.

Not too many years after that, our oldest son Aaron Thomas died at the age of ten in an accident. We had a choice to make to believe and trust that the same God who provided us three wonderful little boys was the same God who saw fit that Aaron's life was complete and his work done at the age of ten. Thankfully through his grace we found that he was true. He was faithful. He was near. He was the same God that provided us those three wonderful boys. We came to find that he provides grace for us when things go well, that we keep things in perspective, don't become self-centered and arrogant. We have also found that he provides grace for our security, the load and the burden, when things are difficult and hard. He is a wonderful, amazing God. We have found that his faithfulness is more than amazing and is wonderful and precious.

Hi, my name is Rob S. and I am one of three boys in the marriage of Tom and Connie S. My older brother, Aaron, and then my younger brother,

Nathan. Growing up, we lived in a small neighborhood with about 11 boys that were within 2-3 years of each other and we ended up spending a lot of time playing outside in the sandboxes, kickball, boom ball, whatever it was. We created quite a big family. No matter what I was doing, though, Aaron was always by my side. He was the captain of the team that always chose me first. He was the cop that would never stop me when we were playing cops and robbers and I was the one stealing the rock. He was the one always looking out for me no matter what we were doing.

In 1995, he went on a trip with a friend and during that trip they went out for a boat ride and during that boat ride a speedboat mounted over the pontoon that Aaron was on and in a matter of seconds it killed my older brother. I remember to this day when we got home and there was a voice mail for my mom and dad to call immediately and Aaron was in the hospital and how my mom sunk to the floor, how the house filled with this scream and how I ran. I remember the funeral and the loads of people that poured out for my brother. He was ten years old and had made that much of an impact.

My parents were faithful people of God. We were a household that went to church on Sunday morning, Sunday night, Wednesday night. My parents gave to the church and created food for the church. We did everything we could imagine that was right by God and he still saw fit to take our family of five to a family of four. In years, he has mended wounds. He has helped to lessen the pain but we still know that Aaron is gone way earlier than we would have liked. God's mercy and grace is always there even when you don't know it. Even when your heart is screaming to say that it isn't.

My son, Liam Aaron, is a reminder every day that God is good. His mercy and love endures forever. Faith doesn't mean always good times. Faith means having a God that is always there.

You know, friends, none of us know how God might test our faith but may we be assured of this: he'll always provide what we need in order to pass that test well.

Would you stand with me, please?

*Father in heaven, Lord, we thank you for the many blessings that we enjoy. We understand that those are tests too. We thank you this morning for the trials. We thank you for the opportunity. We thank you for the way these tests come in all sorts of forms. Lord, I pray that we would be responding to them in a way that would cause you to conclude that you know that we fear you. You know that we love you. You know that we joyfully serve you. And Father, I pray that you would help us to think about the tests that we have and, Lord, I pray that we would make whatever adjustments that we need to in order to be like our father Abraham. We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.*