



## The Testing and Triumph of Faith

*Series: Hebrews – An Anchor for the Soul*

Hebrews 11:17-19; Genesis 22:1-14

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God's testing of Abraham, this story that we are reading this morning, always results in a visceral response. We feel this story deeply, in our guts. We feel this story in our hearts. We feel this story maybe more than any other in the OT. We read this story and we try to put ourselves in the place of Abraham, now an old man.

The story of his life with God, his walk of faith with God, is legendary and true. Here was a man rescued out of his idolatrous and pagan life in Ur of the Chaldees, confronted by God who told him ***“Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”*** (Genesis 12:1–3, ESV)

And by faith, he responded to God's call and went, not knowing where he was going, except following God. Here is a man who when he came to Canaan refused to fall under the spell of Canaanite cities like Sodom and Gomorrah, but by faith kept himself distinct from the wickedness and perversion of those cities, choosing instead to settle in Hebron. Here is man, when he heard that his kinsmen Lot had been taken captive by the four kings of the East, led by Chedorlaomer, who attacked the kings of Sodom and the surrounding area, who by faith led forth 318 men, trained in his own house, and routed these battle hardened kings and their troops by dividing his forces and attacking them from all directions simultaneously. It is this man, after winning this incredible victory, by faith worshipped God and gave tithes to Melchizedek, priest of the Most High God – remember him? – and refused the offer of riches from the king of Sodom saying, ***“I have lifted my hand to the Lord, God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth, that I would not take a thread or a sandal strap or anything that is yours, lest you should say, ‘I have made Abram rich.’”*** (Genesis 14:22–23, ESV)

Here is a man who believed the Lord and whose faith was counted to him as righteousness, a man who was saved by his faith in God. It was not that he was perfect or that Abraham never sinned or made a misstep, that his faith never faltered... it did! But the track of his life, the pattern of his life, was growing and maturing and fully convinced faith in God. This was the man to whom God promised son, a son from Sarah, a son of the covenant, through whom the promises of a great nation and great blessing for all the earth should be fulfilled – ultimately in Jesus Christ. And for 24 years that promise went unanswered. Then when Abraham was 99 years old and he and his wife, Sarah, were as good as dead, God renewed that promise once more. It seemed inconceivable, impossible by human standards that Abraham and Sarah could have a child at their advanced age. By Sarah’s estimate, she was worn out and Abraham was old. And yet, **“He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.”** (Romans 4:19–21, ESV)

By faith, Abraham believed that God would give he and Sarah a son, and He did. God commanded that he be named Isaac, meaning laughter. And there can be no doubt that he brought laughter and joy, deep satisfaction and gratitude to the hearts of Abraham and Sarah. Here he was – finally – the son of promise, son of prophecy, the miracle child, the son of the covenant. Imagine the joy as this old couple took this child in their age-spotted hands, the way they would treasure every moment of his growing up – his first step, first word, his character, his stature, his faith. Imagine how Abraham would instruct him in the ways of God and in the covenant that that God had made with Abraham that he would inherit. They watched him grow to young manhood. Either of them would gladly have laid down their lives for this son. But that wasn’t the test of Abraham’s faith, was it? The test of Abraham’s faith was to offer the son of promise as an offering to the God who had given him to Abraham.

**The Testing of Abraham’s Faith (Heb. 11:17-18; Gen. 22:1-10)** The writer of Hebrews says in verse 17-18, **“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.””** (Hebrews 11:17–18, ESV) He doesn’t give us a great deal of detail in the story. He doesn’t have to – the Hebrew Christians would have known this story intimately. And we are going to walk through it in the Genesis account, but

before we do, I want us to understand the bedrock message of this text – faith will be tested. Faith in God, faith in His Christ – it will be tested and it must be. For our faith to be strong, for it to be enduring, for it to be real and growing, it must be tested and tested faith, proven true, will be rewarded.

Everything strong must be tested – it has to be. We know it to be true. For love to be authentic and strong, it must be tested. Friendships must be tested to be proved real. Convictions must be tested; beliefs must be tested in order to be solid and unshakable. And so must our faith in the Lord be tested. Apart from testing and proving, our faith will not be able to endure the challenges of spiritual warfare, of life in the world, of endurance, and perseverance. We can never be sure of the reality and strength of our faith in God, our faith in Christ, our faith in the power of the gospel to transform us, our faith in the power of God to sustain us, our faith in the power of the gospel to create of us a new people united in Christ, except it be tested and proven true, except those realities be tested.

And God will test our faith. If God is sovereign and we know He is; and if God is good and we know He is; and if God is for us and we know He is; then we know that every test, every trial ultimately comes from Him and that testing is not meant to destroy us. It's not. Peter says in 1 Peter 1:6-7, ***"In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ."*** (1 Peter 1:6–7, ESV) God tests our faith; He tested Abraham's faith, not to destroy but to prove its reality, to make His faith in God like fine gold. We must believe that or this account seems like so much cruelty on God's part. It isn't. This testing of Abraham, the refining and proving of His faith is the most loving thing that God can do for Him. Let me show you what I mean.

Look back at Genesis 22 with me. ***"After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He 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.""*** (Genesis 22:1–2, ESV) God comes and calls to Abraham; Abraham responds with anticipation "Here am I," and he is ready to receive the words of the Lord but there is nothing that could have prepared him for what he heard. Expecting to hear a further promise of God's covenant, expecting perhaps to hear instructions regarding the preparations of his son Isaac for further involvement in the covenant promises of God,

instead he hears these words: ***"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."***

To say that Abraham was stunned is an understatement. We are not told exactly what Abraham's response was, but it isn't hard to imagine. Please do not read this text with some sort of grim fatalism that casts Abraham as some unfeeling robot who responds to God in a cold and mechanical way. That is not the case. His heart melts within him. His mind has to be reeling. His soul is deeply conflicted. God was commanding Abraham to kill his son, to offer his son as a sacrifice, a thing that was never to be done by the people of God, the practice from which God had rescued him when he rescued Him from Ur. This is beyond Abraham's ability to understand and comprehend. Does this mean that God is just like the gods of Ur?

This is deeply felt and the words that God uses to speak of Isaac here emphasize the very real distress and confusion that Abraham would have been feeling. **Take your son, your only son Isaac** – From God's perspective, from the covenant perspective, Abraham only has one true son – Isaac, the child of promise who is precious and central to God's plan. Ishmael had been removed from Abraham's house for the sake of this son – his only son. Moreover, God calls him the son "whom you love," emphasizing even more greatly the preciousness of Isaac to Abraham. He is the only son he has left. Isaac was the promised heir, the child God had promised him so many years before and finally, miraculously had given to him and his wife Sarah, the one through who was to come all future blessings including the blessing of salvation. Through him was to come offspring, descendants of Abraham, and in that line would come the Deliverer. Abraham, at first, is shocked.

He knows that it is God that is speaking to him. He knows God and he knows God's voice but now God is commanding him to do something that on the surface is a horrible act, something that seemed to contradict God's will and His ways. If Abraham was obedient to God's command and sacrificed His son, he would make God a liar. If Isaac died, the covenant dies too. He knows beyond the shadow of a doubt that God has promised that through his son Isaac his descendants would come and on the other hand he also knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that God had commanded him to take this same son and offer him up as a sacrifice. He didn't know *why* all of this was happening, but he could not deny the reality of

what was taking place and his need to respond to the command of God in one way or the other. This is a test in so many ways.

It is a test of Abraham's love for his son. He loved this son with all of his heart. It was a test of his devotion to God. God had not demanded simply a sacrifice, or even a great sacrifice, but the sacrifice of that which Abraham held so dear: his covenant son, Isaac. Abraham would have gladly given God herds of cattle, flocks of sheep, all the silver and gold that he possessed, but his son? Would Abraham give God what He had demanded and love Him even more than his own son? Did God have the right to ask this of Abraham? And the answer is yes. AW Pink, gets to the heart of it when he says, "The Lord has an absolute claim upon us, upon all that we have. As our Maker and Sovereign, He has the right to demand from us anything He pleases, and whatsoever He requires, we must yield. All that we have comes from Him, and must be held for Him, and at His disposal." This was a test of his trust of God, of His belief in God's faithfulness to His promises, of His love and faithfulness to Abraham and to his son.

This testing of Abraham is unique, right? It is unique in redemptive history, unique because it involves Abraham – never to be repeated. But though it is unique, we will face similar testing. We will be challenged to sacrifice and submit our wills to His. Perhaps a relationship, money or possessions, a certain reputation, self-image or lifestyle. He will test our understanding and trust of Him, test our faithfulness to Him and to His word over our devotion to ourselves and even to our families. It is the very way that God weans our hearts from ourselves and from the idolatry of ourselves and of others to which our hearts are so easily prone. God must test us and test Abraham, he did.

How would Abraham respond? We would expect that Abraham would argue with God, that he would intercede for Isaac. We would expect a flurry of questions, a shouting, a struggle. We would expect Abraham to construct an elaborate excuse for why he can – no, why he **must** disobey this command of God, a scenario for justifiable disobedience before God. He must protect His son! But that is not what we see.

***“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. On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar.” (Genesis 22:3–4, ESV)*** It had to be the longest night of Abraham’s life. This is a test like no other in history and so we have to ask how it is that Abraham got to this point of obedience. We don’t know specifically what took place but it isn’t hard to imagine. As he reflected on the staggering demand of God, on God’s right to make it, how much he loved Isaac, and how his devotion to the Lord, Abraham had to come to a point of silencing the whispers of his flesh. Walking in faith demands that we silence our flesh when it opposes the will and commands of God, especially when it seems to make sense and seems so appealing. You know how it is. It is amazing how clever and how convincing our flesh can sound, how spiritual it can sound. But faith must silence the whispers of the flesh in favor of what we know about God. Faith must silence our feelings, our wisdom, in favor of the commands and truth of God.

Abraham humbly bowed himself before God. He worshipped God as God and that is no small statement. Abraham’s faith was rooted in conscious humility that God is he was not. That is no small statement. He had no right to sit in judgment of God’s character or His demands. Abraham was a man who had come to understand that that faith in God demands obedience even in the most difficult of circumstances and especially when we cannot see the end from the beginning. The same faith that receives God’s promises must also obey God’s commands. That this has been worked into his soul by God is evidenced by his quick obedience – and again the sense of the Greek in the Hebrews passage is that he obeyed even as God’s command was ringing in his ears -- to an excruciating command and make no mistake this is the most excruciating command that could have ever been given to him.

But there is more to this than determined obedience. It is more than a grit your teeth and do what God commands kind of thing. There is at work a refining and strengthening of Abraham’s faith. In his heart and mind, at some point the question turned from “How can I do this?” to “How is God going to fulfill His promise, and uphold His word to me, and remain a God of honor and truth?” This issue is resolved in Abraham’s mind by the third day, maybe before.

***“On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. 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.”” (Genesis 22:4–5, ESV)*** We will worship and we will come again to you. These were no idle words, not small talk and no deceit but a settled conviction that this

would not be the end of Isaac. HE believed and expected that God would raise him from the dead. That is what the writer of Hebrews tells us. Look at it again.

***“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)*** I want you to understand something here is that so vital. When the writer of Hebrews uses the phrase “offered up Isaac,” he uses the perfect tense. What that means is that the sacrifice actually took place as far as Abraham’s heart and obedience were concerned. From God’s perspective and from Abraham’s, he actually offered up his son. It was a done deal in his mind, but he was also certain that God would raise him from the dead.

How did he arrive there? By faith! He considered, he believed, he was assured that God would raise Isaac from the dead. The word for considered is a word that means to “calculate or compute.” Abraham concluded that he would see a miracle and in this conclusion we see a mind and a soul mastered by faith in God. His thought process had to be something like this: God is not a liar. He has shown me over and over again that He can be trusted. God can be trusted because God keeps His promises. He has kept His promises to me. He promised me a son and he gave him to me and he has promised that through that son would be the fulfillment of the promises of the covenant that he has made with me. Therefore this son must live or God would be found to be a liar. God is commanding me to put this son to death, to sacrifice my son to Him as an act of worship. I cannot comprehend his wisdom in this. In my eyes this is a contradiction but there can be no contradiction with God – there is wisdom beyond human understanding, power beyond comprehension, a glory that is indescribable, but not contradiction. Since God cannot lie and there can be no contradiction found in Him, then there is only one solution that I can come up with – God is going to perform a miracle and raise Isaac from the dead.

Abraham refuses to doubt God or to accuse God, but instead He trusts God so much that he expects a miracle. A resurrection had never happened before but that is of little consequence to Abraham. Just as God made body that was as good as dead fertile again, just as God made Sarah’s dead womb alive, so God will raise Isaac from the dead. Abraham is certain of it. A resurrection, as outlandish as it may seem, is compatible with the nature of

God -- He is the author of life who has life in Himself. Contradiction and lying, failing to be true to His Word, however, is not who God is.

What we see in Abraham is not a faith-in-faith kind of faith. This is not a leap in the dark, or some I-just-hope-it-all-works-out kind of faith. It is not fanciful foolishness or foolish presumption. This is a measured and mature, fully developed and fully convinced kind of faith. This is a believing-what-cannot-be-seen kind of faith, a believing what-had-never-had-been-seen kind of faith. This is the faith that pleases God, a faith that is rooted in the character and the nature and the promises of God, a faith that places God first over all. And it is a faith that he had taught to his son.

***“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. 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?” Abraham said, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.” So they went both of them together.”***

**(Genesis 22:6–8, ESV)** Was this hard? Yes, no question. He had to fight the urge to stop, to quit, to cry out to God, “I can’t!” And although it had to pain Abraham deeply, this act of killing his own son even confident in the resurrection, still he pressed on. He chose faith over his flesh, trust over his fear, and hope over despair. They made their way up the hill to the place where Isaac would be offered; Isaac carrying the very wood by which he will be offered to God as a burnt offering. I can’t imagine the lump in his throat when Isaac asked, “Abi (Daddy), where will we get the lamb?” “God will provide, son. God will provide.” It had to be then, that Abraham began to explain to Isaac what God had commanded of him and what awaited them on that hill. And it is here that we see the faith of a son who has known the God of his Father and has seen his own father’s example of faith in that God.

***“When 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. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son.”*** (Genesis 22:9–10, ESV) There are no signs of struggle. Instead, in faithful obedience, Isaac, who could have easily overpowered his father and escaped instead willingly submits to being bound as a sacrifice and placed on the altar. What faith in Isaac. The circle of testing is complete – Abraham and Isaac must trust God. And it is here, in this crucible of testing, that we see



**The Triumph of Faith (Heb. 11:19, Gen. 22:11-14)** The writer of Hebrews says of what took place next in shorthand saying, ***“He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.”*** (Hebrews 11:19, ESV) Abraham receive Isaac back from the dead, figuratively speaking, and Moses describes what took place much more clearly. When Abraham raised his arm, knife in hand to slay his son, we read, ***“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 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.” And 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. So 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.””*** (Genesis 22:11–14, ESV)

This is glorious. What a moment! What joy! What triumph! What was the triumph of Abraham’s faith? First, that his faith was proven and made complete. The phrase, “now I know”, is not saying that God is, in this moment, learned something about Abraham that he hadn’t previously known. This is what is known as an “anthropomorphism” - it is language that depicts God as thinking or acting from within a very human perspective in order that we can better understand something. It’s not that God didn’t know how much Abraham loved Him, trusted Him or how he would respond. Of course God knew - before any of this happened - what was in Abraham’s heart, it was Abraham that needed to know. And in saying these words, God commends Abraham’s faith; He commends his fear of God. The triumph of Abraham’s faith is first, that he receives the commendation of God that his faith is proven and complete. His desperate dependency upon God, his absolute trust in the Lord was commended and rewarded that day. And don’t forget how Abraham’s faith impacted Isaac. Isaac learned more that day about obedience and faith than any preacher’s sermons could have taught him. And he saw it all demonstrated in his father.

Second, Abraham came to know God more fully, more completely than he before this test. God provided for Isaac a substitute that day, a ram, not a lamb. He provides a substitute for Isaac, a substitute that redeems him from the altar, one that takes his place. And so Abraham names the place Yahweh Jireh – The LORD will provide or the LORD will see to it. Having endured this test of faith, He came to know God more intimately and came to

experience even greater joy. What joy!! His son redeemed, purchased back from the dead. But there is one more thing.

Abraham, through this test of faith, as remarkable as this sounds, received a greater view of Christ than he ever had before. That is no small reward, no small triumph. Notice these words again, ***So 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.*** or “On the mount of the Lord, he will be seen.” On the mount who or what would be provided, who or what would be seen? The answer can only be Jesus Christ.

In John chapter 8, Jesus was confronting the faithless Jews who claimed to be God’s people because they were physical descendants of Abraham. Jesus said to them: ***“If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did.”*** (John 8:39–40, ESV) Then later He said to them these words: ***“Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad.”*** (John 8:56, ESV) Abraham rejoiced to see Christ’s day and he saw it on this day on Mt Moriah. In all of the events surrounding the near-sacrifice of his only son Isaac, Abraham was given a picture of God the Father’s sacrifice of the Greater Son, Jesus Christ. The similarities are overwhelming.

The sacrifice demanded a son – Abraham’s son, his only son – that had been the emphasis. No other sacrifice would do. Likewise, it must be the only begotten Son of God, God’s only Son, who must be put forward as an offering by God, as the propitiation for sin. The place of sacrifice is Mt. Moriah, the place in Jerusalem where Solomon would build his temple. And not far from that site, still in Moriah, on a hill called Calvary, the Son of God would be crucified for the sins of his people.

Both sons would bear the instrument of their own destruction. Isaac bearing the wood for the burnt offering and Jesus Christ bearing the wood of the cross. Both sons willingly submitted to the calling to be sacrificed. Isaac submitting to his father and bound like a sacrifice and laid on the altar. And Jesus, submitting to His Father, being bound as it were by our sin and lifted up on the cross. As we saw before, the writer of Hebrews describes the submission of Christ to the Father in this way: ***“Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, ‘Behold, I***

***have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.' ”” (Hebrews 10:5–7, ESV)*** Both sons under the hand of their fathers, ready to receive from their hands what has been commanded. Abraham raises the knife. He has the fire. He is poised to what is necessary to offer to God what he has commanded. God the Father, raising His own hand, ready to exact judgment and punishment upon the head of Christ for our sins, to do what is necessary that His wrath against sinful man can be quenched, to receive the sacrifice that his holiness demands.

And it is here that the similarities end. When Abraham raised the knife to slay his son, his hand is stayed and a ram is provided, a substitute for Isaac so that he may go free. He is cut loose from the altar and received back to life by his father.

But for Christ there is no substitute to be found. There is no-one to take His place. He is the Lamb who was promised, the Lamb God would provide, the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the Lamb without blemish or spot. There is no substitute for Jesus; instead, He is ours. This is the day that Abraham saw and rejoiced in. It is the one, if we know the salvation of God in Christ, in which we rejoice as well. And Abraham glimpsed that reality up close in the redemption of his son by a ram, and he saw it too from afar, by faith, in the death of Jesus Christ.

The joy of Abraham in receiving his son back from the dead was great indeed, but it was not a near-sighted joy. It was a grand and sweeping joy – an overarching joy – the joy of hope in the Lord, the joy of faith well founded, the joy of the surety of salvation, the joy of a Savior, to Abraham, as yet, unseen. Abraham got see Christ.

And, beloved, we must see, and the Hebrew Christians needed to see, that this is the goal of the testing of our faith, no matter how hard, how painful, how costly. This is the triumph of faith – the commendation that our faith in real and not imagined, the reward of knowing God more intimately and with greater joy and satisfaction than ever before, and the reward of a greater, a fuller, a more compelling vision of Jesus Christ that we could have in no other way.

***“In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 1:6–7, ESV)*** May we all embrace the testing and trial and refining of our faith in exactly this way and have a faith that God commends.

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