

THE TWO TRUST TESTS (Genesis 22:1-18)

Do you remember being in school and having to take tests and exams? There were different kinds. Every week there was a spelling test, and there was the unit test, the mid-term, and the final exam. Possibly, the most feared test was the infamous pop quiz. The words, “Clear your desk and get out a piece of paper,” struck fear in the heart of every student. You never knew it was coming, but it was meant to keep you current on your reading assignments or actively listening to the lectures.

Within exams, there were various parts.

- The least feared was the true/false test. You had at least a 50% chance of getting the right answer.
- There was the multiple-choice exam. If you had been paying attention, you could usually decipher which one to circle or check.
- There was matching where there would be two columns. One side might be a list of terms and the other column would define or describe the term. Your job was to figure out what went with which.
- There was the fill-in-the-blank. You had to memorize the facts, dates, or names and supply them in the appropriate blanks.
- My least favorite was the short answer. You would have to write a two or three-sentence explanation over a certain topic
- Finally, there was the essay exam. In college, I had to use something I had never even heard of in high school—the blue book. It was a thin, little notebook. The professor would write a question on the board, and for 50 minutes, you would write an essay in answer to that question.

Some tests were open book, but most were taken only with what you had stored in your head. Everyone’s favorite test was the take-home test.

Tests and exams didn’t end when you got out of school. I’m not talking about drug tests, blood tests, or medical tests. I mean that we are tested by life, tested by the challenges we face, and tested by the unforeseen hardships we encounter.

Rick Warren’s best-selling book *The Purpose Driven Life* is divided into 40 days of readings. Day 5 begins with the words, “The way you *see* your life *shapes* your life.” Warren mentions various metaphors he has heard that people use to describe their lives. Some say that life is a circus, or life is a roller-coaster, or life is a puzzle. Forest Gump’s mother said that life is like a box of chocolates; you never know what you are going to get.

According to Warren, the Bible presents life as a test. The Bible opens with Adam and Eve being given an obedience test; they failed it. He explains:

You are *always* being tested. God constantly watches your response to people, problems, success, conflict, illness, disappointment, and even the weather! He even watches the simplest actions such as when you open a door for others, when you pick up a piece of trash, or when you’re polite toward a clerk or waitress . . .

You will be tested by major changes, delayed promises, impossible problems, unanswered prayers, undeserved criticism, and even senseless tragedies. In my own life, I have noticed that God tests my *faith* through problems, tests my *hope* by how I handle possessions, and tests my *love* through people . . .

Every day is an important day, and every second is a growth opportunity to deepen your character, to demonstrate love, or to depend on God.

In Genesis 22 we will see how God chooses to test His servant Abraham, and we will watch as Abraham aces that test. I believe our passage shows us two tests. We will look at both. Tests are meant to prove something. The tests you took in school were an opportunity for you to prove to your teacher that you had mastered the material she or he had taught. Academic testing is meant to prove to the parents that the school is doing a good job of educating their children. When an architectural engineer tests a structure, he wants to prove that it is stable and safe. The city tests the water to prove to the community that it is safe to drink.

God tests His children to prove that they are relying upon Him. God gave Abraham what I am calling a Trust Test. Let's read Genesis 22:1-14. While God clearly tested Abraham, I believe there is a sense in which Abraham tested God. He tested God in a good sense. I will explain that later.

Trust Test #1: God Wants to Prove to Himself That He Can Trust Us to Trust Him.

This is not the first time that God had tested Abraham. All the way back in Genesis 12, God commanded Abram to leave his family and go to the land that God would show him. In a sense, God was calling Abram to burn his bridge to the past. Abram did. He left, and he never went back. When his son Isaac needed a wife, Abraham sent a servant back to find a wife for his son, but he never went back himself.

It is one thing to burn the bridge to your past, but the test God lays before Abraham in Genesis 22 is far more difficult. He is telling Abraham to burn his only bridge to the future. I have heard it said that when a parent dies, you lose part of your past, but when a child dies, you lose your future.

God was not warning Abraham that Isaac was going to die from some mysterious disease or a terrible accident. No. What makes this story so horrific is that God was telling Abraham to sacrifice his son as a burnt offering. This would involve two things—a knife and a fire. With a knife, he was to take his son's life. Once his son had bled out, he was to use fire to consume the body of his son upon an altar he had built.

You might be saying, "Whoa, wait a minute, Pastor! God would never do that!" Intuitively, you think, "That's just not right!" If you are familiar with the OT Scriptures, you know that God forbade and condemned child sacrifice, and here He is commanding His faithful follower, Abraham, to sacrifice his beloved son. What's up with that?

The famous reformer Martin Luther was conducting a family devotion. He told the story, "Then Abraham bound him and laid him upon the wood. The father raised the knife. The boy bared his throat. If God had slept an instant, the lad would have been dead. I could not have watched."

Luther's wife, Katie, was having none of it. She protested, "I do not believe it. God would not have treated *his* son like that!"

Luther replied softly, "But Katie, he did."

The story here is a beautiful and dramatic telling of the Passion of Jesus more than 2,000 years before Jesus entered the world He had made. Look at v. 2. Compare that to John 3:16. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son . . ." Yes, God loved His Son, but He saw the great need of the world, and He chose to sacrifice His Son for the need of this world whom He also loved.

Consider where this event took place. According to v. 2, Abraham was to go to Moriah, to a certain mountain that God would choose. The name *Moriah* is found only two times in Scripture, here and in 2 Chronicles 3:1 which reads, "Then Solomon began to build the house of the LORD in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah . . ." God took Abraham to Jerusalem long before it was known as Jerusalem supposedly to sacrifice his son. Maybe it was even to the temple mount. Maybe it was close to the place where God's Son would be sacrificed upon a cross.

Notice that Isaac, without his knowledge, was carrying the wood upon which his father intended to sacrifice him. Two thousand years later, upon that same mountain, Jesus would carry the wood, the cross upon which He would die.

The difference between the two stories is that Isaac did not die because he had a substitute. In Jesus' case, Jesus did die because He was the substitute whom God provided for you and me. This was God's plan all along. Revelation 13:8 speaks of "the Lamb who was killed before the world was made."

God never intended Abraham to take the life of his son, but Abraham didn't know that. Abraham lived before the writing of the OT Scriptures. He didn't know that child sacrifice was something that God would forbid because it was an abomination to Him. All he knew was that this was something God told him to do.

When we read this story, we invest it with feeling. We imagine how we would feel, and we try to put our feelings on to Abraham. Interestingly, this passage never tells us or even hints at what Abraham felt. God was looking for an obedience that was born of trust, not feelings. We will never feel our way into obedience because feelings are an untrustworthy guide. Our feelings will routinely lead us into disobedience but never obedience. Don't trust your feelings. Don't follow your feelings. Don't look to your feelings to tell you what to do. That is a recipe for disaster.

If Abraham didn't look to his feelings, what did he do? I think Abraham pondered. He thought. He reflected. He looked at what God told him to do, and he compared it to what God had said to him earlier. Earlier, God had told him that Isaac, little *laughter*, was the promised child, and it would be through Isaac that Abraham would be the father of a great nation. It would be through Isaac that a great blessing would come to all the earth.

After reflecting on what God had said, Abraham reflected on the very character of God. From his experience with God, he knew that God does not lie. He knew that God had never misled Him. He knew that God didn't make mistakes.

I imagine Abraham had a rather sleepless night after God had given him his assignment. In addition to feeling confused and scared, I think Abraham may also have felt rather alone. The message he was given was not something he could share with his wife. Had he done so, there was no way she would have allowed Abraham to leave with

her son.

Years ago, when my son was just a little shaver, maybe two or three, our family was living in Hinton, OK. On a Friday night in the fall, we went to watch the Hinton Comets football team. It was an away game; they were playing against the Casady Cyclones. Casady is a private school not far from where I grew up. I called my brother. He met us there. At halftime, my brother, Benjamin, and I got down out of the stands and went to get some hotdogs. After buying the dogs, I went to the condiment table and turned around for a few seconds to get some ketchup. When I turned back around, Benjamin wasn't there. I scanned in every direction; I didn't see my son. I told my brother, "I don't see Benjamin." We both looked for him. Maybe 30 seconds later, my brother spotted Benjamin walking off, who knows where. He wasn't gone long, but I was panicked inside. There were all these people, strangers milling about, and I didn't know where my son was. All I could think was, "What am I going to tell his mom?" What do you say? "Hey, just wanted you to know that when I went to get hot dogs, I kind of lost Benjamin. I have no idea where he is. Here's your hot dog."

And what was Abraham going to tell his wife when he got back from his father/son outing, and Isaac wasn't there?

He couldn't tell Sarah what God told him to do, and he couldn't even tell the servants with him what he was going to do. They, too, would have stopped him. There are times, not many, but there are times when you must bear a burden alone. That is tough, but there are times when it is necessary because you can't let well-minded people stop you from doing what God has called you to do.

Most often, however, if you have surrounded yourself with the right people, they will help you follow God's will rather than hinder you.

When God calls you to do something, and when his message is clear, you must act, and you must do so promptly. Our obedience is to be immediate. Abraham's was. We read in v. 3 that Abraham left early in the morning the very next day after God spoke to him.

As Abraham made that three-day journey, he must have wrestled in his mind with what God had said and who God is. He tried to reconcile the two. The writer of Hebrews tells us the conclusion to which Abraham came. Listen to Hebrews 11:17-19. I am going to read these verses from the NLT:

¹⁷ It was by faith that Abraham offered Isaac as a sacrifice when God was testing him. Abraham, who had received God's promises, was ready to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, ¹⁸ even though God had told him, "Isaac is the son through whom your descendants will be counted." ¹⁹ Abraham reasoned that if Isaac died, God would be able to bring him back to life again. And in a sense, Abraham did receive his son back from the dead.

This was also a foreshadowing of Jesus. In Abraham's mind, Isaac was as good as dead. When God spared Isaac and supplied another sacrifice, in Abraham's heart, Isaac had been raised from the dead.

According to Paul, that is what happens to us when we trust Jesus as Savior and Lord. We die to sin, and we are raised to live a new life. Our faith is all about dying and rising. You can't do the second until you do the first.

At the moment Abraham had raised his knife, ready to do what God had told him to do, an angel of the Lord stopped him. The heavenly being spoke God's message: "Now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me" (22:12). God had the proof He was looking for, the proof that Abraham could be trusted to trust Him.

Throughout your life as a believer, God has been testing you. He has tested you in small ways and big. Through these tests, have you given sufficient evidence to God that He can trust you to trust Him?

In our text, there is one thing that Abraham said three times on three different occasions. Did you catch it? In v. 1, God spoke Abraham's name, and Abraham replied, "Here I am." Then, in v. 7 as Abraham and Isaac were making their way to the mountain God would show them, Isaac called out, "Father?" Abraham answered, "Here I am, my son." Finally, in v. 11, the angel of the Lord called out, "Abraham, Abraham!" Immediately, Abraham stopped and said, "Here I am."

When God speaks your name . . .

- Will you hear Him?
- Will you stop?
- Will you acknowledge and recognize His voice?
- Will you indicate your availability and readiness to do what He says?

I encourage you to give God every reason to trust you to trust Him.

We come to the second trust test.

Trust Test #2: We Need to Prove to Ourselves That We Can Trust God to Be Trustworthy.

You may feel uncomfortable with the idea of testing God. Doesn't God's word tell us not to test God? Yes, it does. In Matthew 4:7, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:16 to Satan. That OT verse is a prohibition against testing God. It says, "You shall not put YHWH your God to the test." I think that has to do with testing God's patience, seeing if He really means what He has said. We are not to do that.

In Malachi 3, however, the prophet encourages us to test God in that matter of giving. Through the pen of the prophet God says, "Bring the full tithe into the storehouse," and He adds, "And thereby put me to the test . . . if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need" (Malachi 3:10).

We are not to test God's patience, but we are to prove His faithfulness through our obedience. The latter is testing God in a good sense. It is proving to yourself and maybe to others that our God is good. He's faithful. He's trustworthy. You can rely on Him.

Our obedience does not require that we understand why God does what He does or how God does what He does. For us to obey God, all we must do is trust that He knows what He is doing, and that He has commanded us to do this or that.

Abraham had spent the last 35 or 40 years of his life following God, and in that time, he had learned that God is trustworthy. He had learned that God always does what He says, that He always fulfills His promises, and that He always looks out for those who are

His.

This command to sacrifice His son didn't make sense to Him, but he had learned it wasn't his job to get God to make sense. It was his job to obey God. As hard as it was, this was an opportunity for Abraham to prove to himself that he could trust God to be trustworthy.

Maybe the one thing that most helped Abraham to trust God to be trustworthy is that over time he had learned that God is always faithful to provide. This was a lesson he passed on to his son. Isaac asked a perceptive question as they were making their way to the place of the sacrifice. He said, "Dad, you have the fire, and I have the wood, but where is the sacrifice? Dad, we are missing something here." Abraham's response was, "Don't worry, son. God will provide."

When you find yourself worried, anxious, or fretting, just remind yourself what Abraham told Isaac; God will provide.

When the angel of the LORD stopped Abraham from going through with the sacrifice of his son, the patriarch looked up, and he saw God's provision. He saw a ram. He wouldn't even have to catch it. It was already caught. He had the knife. He had the fire. He had the wood. He had the altar. All he needed was the animal for the sacrifice, and God provided it when it was needed.

God has impeccable timing. He knows what you need, and He will provide it when it is needed. The news comes just when you need to hear it. The check comes just when the money is needed. The answer comes just at the right time and in the right way.

Let me end this message with a story. I believe I have told it once before. My feeling is that if a story is worth hearing once, it is worth repeating.

There once was a small church in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains that was involved in a building program. A church member had willed a piece of land to the church, and the church had built a new sanctuary on that land. Just ten days before the church was to hold its first service in the new sanctuary, the building inspector told the pastor that the parking lot was not big enough for the size building they had built. They would not be allowed to use the building until they doubled the size of their parking lot.

This created a problem. The church had used all the available land to build the sanctuary. The only land left was the mountain behind the new sanctuary. The only way they could provide more parking spaces was to move the mountain.

The next Sunday morning, the pastor announced that evening there would be a prayer meeting for all those who had mountain-moving faith. At that prayer meeting, they would ask God to move the mountain and provide the money needed to pave the parking lot before the dedication service which was planned for the next Sunday. About two dozen of the church's 300 members showed up to pray. They prayed for nearly three hours. At 10:00 the pastor said the final, "Amen," and he assured everyone, "We'll open next Sunday as scheduled. God has never let down before, and I believe He will be faithful this time, too."

On Monday morning as the pastor was working in his study, he heard a knock at his office door. When he called, "Come in," a construction foreman walked in and took off his hard hat. He said, "Excuse me, Reverend. I'm from Acme Construction Company over in the next county. We're building a huge new shopping mall over there and we need some fill dirt. Would you be willing to sell us a chunk of that mountain behind the

church? We'll pay you for the dirt we remove and pave all the exposed area free of charge, if we can have it right away. We can't do anything else until we get the dirt in and allow it to settle properly."

The next Sunday, that little church dedicated their new sanctuary as planned along with a new parking lot behind the church where there used to be a mountain.

What mountain do you need moved? Our God provides.