

FAITH MOVES MOUNTAINS - DOUBT CREATES THEM!

(YOUR FAITH WILL BE TESTED)

The third installment of our series is designed to illustrate the faithfulness of God. One of the best Biblical characters to illustrate God's faithfulness is Abraham.

Genesis 22 is the high point of Abraham's faith. If the progress of Abraham's faith could have been drawn on a piece of graph paper it would have looked like the Himalayas, with many staggering pinnacles of trust interspersed with deep valleys of doubt. But towering over the other incidents was Everest, or to put it more accurately Mt. Moriah! What took place there stands throughout human history as one of the great demonstrations of man's faith in a faithful God.

In this dramatic father-son story, we see the zenith of one man's trust in God. It also confronts us with the critical question of what we value most in our lives.

The Abraham-Isaac Story

God said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied.

Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about" (22:1-2).

With significant understatement, the text says this was a "test" of Abraham. Test? It was to be the ultimate sounding of the depths of one man's faith. It was the exploration of Abraham's soul to see whether there was a single fiber of his being still reserved to himself rather than yielded to God. It was heaven's way of finding out what Abraham had learned from a lifetime of spiritual pilgrimage. Test? It was Abraham's final exam.

Abraham and Sarah had been childless throughout their long marriage. They had prayed and surely consulted the physicians of their time and place. They had even tried surrogate motherhood with Sarah's handmaid, Hagar. That was a

disastrous mistake for the peace of his family – and for the subsequent peace of the world. Hadn't God promised Abraham a son? Yes, but the son would be given by God in His own good time and through Sarah's womb.

About fifteen years after the birth of Ishmael to Hagar, Sarah thrilled her husband with the news that she was pregnant. **"Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him" (Genesis 21:2-3).** Mother's Day would mean something to Sarah now. And Abraham had a son to teach how to play, how to work and how to be a man – a godly man.

This was the "child of promise" God had given the couple in their old age. He was the son through whom the promises of descendants, land and a blessing to all nations would be fulfilled. How they must have doted on him. They took delight in his every word, every act. Abraham and Sarah loved him more than life itself.

Then came the baffling, incomprehensible and disconcerting command to Abraham that he should sacrifice his son and burn his body to ashes. How could this be? So much depends on Isaac. How could a Holy God command something of Abraham that sounds so typical of pagan gods and so foreign to the God of Scripture? My soul quakes at the prospect of trying to unravel the mystery of this juxtaposition of God's bright promise and God's dark command. Faith seems to be demanding too much of the man Abraham.

The only thing more incredible here than the command was Abraham's response to it. **"Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about" (22:3).** There is no hint of reluctance or hesitation. There is only faith-authenticating obedience. **You see that his faith and his actions were working together,** James later said of this event, **"and his faith was made complete by what he did" (James 2:22).**

So the father and son traveled together for three days. Did Abraham travel in the solemn silence of knowing of what lay

ahead? Did he talk the whole way, wanting to spend every one of those precious, final moments speaking with his boy? Did he ask countless leading questions, wanting to hear – in order to remember in exact detail – the sound of Isaac’s voice? And what about Isaac himself? Might he have pressed his father for details of this unscheduled trip they were taking? Only one thing is certain: Abraham could not tell Isaac the details of what lay ahead, for he did not know himself.

“On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. He said to his servants, ‘Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you’ ” (22:4-5). The place the patriarch saw in the distance, Mount Moriah, is mentioned only one other time in the Bible. Unless there were two places with the same name, the place Abraham saw was the same one where Israel’s temple would later stand. **“Then Solomon began to build the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah . . .” (II Chronicles 3:1).** On the same elevated spot where the temple altar would someday stand, Abraham would build an altar. Near the place where Jesus would be raised on His cross, Isaac would be prepared for his death.

Yet one who reads the text closely is struck with the pronouns Abraham used to his two servants when he and his beloved son left them. **“We** will worship and then **we** will come back to you,” he said. So did he not really expect to have to plunge his knife into Isaac?

Oh, he appears to have had no doubt that he would slay his incomparable, irreplaceable son. As he had tried to sort it all out in his mind over the previous three days of travel, he had come to the conclusion that God could do the unprecedented in raising Isaac from the dead (Hebrews 11:17-19). At a level that went beyond the known and familiar, Abraham knew beyond any wisdom of his own that God would find a way to honor His word and bring life out of death.

As Abraham and Isaac went up the side of Mount Moriah together, the stronger, younger man carried the wood and his father carried fire and a knife. It was at this point that Isaac asked a specific question about the sacrifice. **“The fire and wood are here,” he said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” (22:7).** Then Abraham uttered a wonderful

statement of faith that would be a great motto for all who seek the Light. **“Abraham answered, ‘God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.’ And the two of them went on together”** (Genesis 22:8). God will provide! What a marvelous way to summarize the faith perspective about all of existence.

Rushing now to the end of the story, Genesis tells us that Abraham built an altar, arranged the wood on it, bound his son (something he could not have done if Isaac had resisted or run!) and laid Isaac on the altar. There is no hint of hesitation in the narrative, and there appear to have been no petitions for new instructions. Abraham reached for the knife with which he would take Isaac’s life. Then and only then did an angel of the Lord call his name and tell him not to harm him. **“Now I know that you fear God,”** said the angel, **“because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son”** (Genesis 22:9-12).

God had never wanted Isaac’s life. What he wanted that day on Mount Moriah was Abraham’s undivided and conspicuous allegiance. He tested Abraham to the ultimate limit. As awful a test as it was, perhaps we see the point of it in retrospect: In order for God to do a supreme work of grace in the life of Abraham, He first had to be sure there was nothing that Isaac’s father loved or trusted more than the God of Creation.

Testing

The ultimate issue in every human life is trust. And it is testing – usually sudden and unexpected – that reveals our priorities both to God and ourselves. Sometimes we find out that we have been leaning our ladders against the wrong walls. Sometimes we are affirmed in a relationship with God that sees us through.

Testing comes to everyone. In our world of shallow theology and pat answers, we don’t like to think of God’s having created a planet that can stretch us to our physical, emotional and spiritual limits and test our faith. **“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. . . . Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him”** (James 1:2-3, 12).

Faith is made strong through a variety of tests and challenges in much the same way a mind is made strong through disciplined study or a body is made strong through exhausting exercise. "No pain, no gain" is not just a body-builder's motto; it is the rule for faith-builders, too.

What God wants to happen in our times of testing is to see genuine faith on display. No more than God wanted Isaac's life that day but Abraham's demonstrated allegiance does He want to see you crushed by your job loss, marriage failure, or health crisis. In fact, though Satan rather than God is behind the distress in our lives, God is sovereign over all creation and will never allow anything to happen to you that is greater than you can bear. "No test or temptation that comes your way is beyond the course of what others have had to face. All you need to remember is that God will never let you down; he'll never let you be pushed past your limit; he'll always be there to help you come through it" (I Corinthians 10:13, The Message).

The Lord's biological half-brother makes a helpful distinction between the two different types of testing that come into people's lives. God tests us only to bring out the good in us, but Satan tempts us to seduce us to do evil. God brings tests and allows affliction to "discipline" His saints (Hebrews 12:7ff); Satan brings temptations to seduce and destroy God's people. Writing about such enticements to sin, James said: "When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone" (James 1:13).

The thing people of faith learn is that "God will provide." Returning to the father-son story at hand, recall that "God will provide" was the father's answer when his son asked about the absence of a sacrifice as they were climbing Mount Moriah. When the angel called Abraham's name and told him not to harm Isaac, "Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by his horns" (22:13a). True to Abraham's confident statement of faith, God supplied a ram as a substitute for Isaac. The God who tested Abraham from His sovereignty resolved the test by His grace. And in that act of substitution we see a foreshadowing of Calvary. What a moment of triumph that was! But faith always calls its pilgrim-exiles to trust our Creator's incredible timing and abundant provision.

Genesis 22:14 says Abraham named that place “Jehovah-jireh” (KJV) or “The Lord Will Provide” (NIV). The God who calls is the God who empowers. The Sovereign Lord who tests is the same One who provides. Both the testing and the providing are acts of His grace. We witness His provision and learn that He is.

The angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time and said, “I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me” (22:15-18).

What is Your Isaac?

Do you honestly think the point of the testing God allows to come to your life is essentially any different from Abraham’s on Mount Moriah? God wants your heart as you journey on your path. He wants you to pass the test by trusting Him at the critical junctures of your life. What was true with Abraham is therefore true with you or me: In order for God to do a supreme work of grace within us, He must be sure there is nothing in our hearts that we love more than Him.

This is the meaning of Jesus’ words:

Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it (Matthew 10:37-39).

It is not for the sake of God’s vanity that He makes such a demand on us. It is for the sake of our survival. Unless you can endure the turning of your most precious single treasure into ashes, God would be unfair to send you into an arena where every day will wrench your soul with choices between flesh and Spirit, this world and the one to come, your pleasure and God’s will. Once you have made the definitive choice between God and your Isaac, however, it will be safe for God to send you

wherever He needs a representative who can show the world His glory.

So what is your Isaac? What is the thing that means more to you right now than anything else in life? Could you give it up without cursing God and turning your back on him? Could you give it up without whining that He has asked too much of you?

Is it your career or present job? A position you waited years to get? Your house? Your car? Your investments? Your health? Someone you had planned to marry? Your mate? Your child? Please don't misunderstand the point here. I do not think for a minute that the God of Light is going to speak to you as he did to Abraham and ask you to do what he commanded him to do. But I do believe that faith is still tested and that only those who pass the test are entrusted with God's most significant tasks among men.

Testing can come from a variety of sources. Divine Discipline. Satanic Temptations. Achievements. Foolish Mistakes. Wealth. Awards. Unemployment. A New Job. Poverty. Education. Fame. Shame. The list is infinitely long.

When you are in the crucible of testing, your head whirs. You feel confusion and pain. The joy goes out of your existence. You are in the deep darkness of your soul's long night. You feel broken and empty. A sense of helplessness descends over you. You reach out to people, to things that were once important to you, perhaps to alcohol or drugs. Nothing helps. Nobody can rescue you.

Then, ever so slowly, God's love becomes visible in your suffering. You begin to realize that what you have been going through has taught you what no sermon or theology course ever could: God alone is ultimate and keeping faith with Him means everything.

Suddenly there is a point to what you have been experiencing. It has humbled you and made you sensitive. It has purified you and let you see God more clearly. It has changed your priorities about everything.

At precisely that point in your experience, God may do for you what He did for Abraham and give your Isaac back to you. Now

that you have it back, though, you see it differently. It isn't all-important and all-consuming anymore. Only God will ever again have first place in your life and your Isaac will have its meaning only in relation to His will. Your Isaac can now be useful without being an obstacle, important without being a preoccupation, pleasant without being unsafe.

Abraham appears to have had Isaac in proper perspective before he was put to the test. He breezed through. **"Acting in faith, he was as ready to return the promised son, his only son, as he had been to receive him"** (Hebrews 11:17b, *The Message*). Most of us seem to get clear perspectives and surrendered wills only at the end of a painful process. We stumble through. We hang on – but just barely. But it is wonderful when the test is over and the point of it has been fathomed.

At the end of your testing, wealth or poverty is no longer the issue. Nor getting the vice presidency or being squeezed out of the company. Nor being single or married. The point of reference for your total being is God, the Creator and your faith in Him. Your obedience to Him. Your surrender of everything in your life on His altar is your pathway to the ultimate Light.

Sculptors don't transform marble into beautiful pieces of visual poetry with nail files and tissues. They use unrelenting hammers and sharp chisels. Ugly piles of dust and stone chips accumulate where they have worked. Only when they are finished do we see the reason for such powerful tools and methods.

The person who has had his Isaac taken away entirely may be prepared for an altogether new role in life. The one who has had her Isaac taken away from the center of her heart but allowed still to keep it may be called to minister from that experience. From the former, some may be called to a mission field or to a career of full-time service or to minister to those who have gone through divorce, drug rehab, or the death of a child. From the latter, others are asked to bring healing to those who are barely hanging on to their jobs, their marriages, or their sanity.

If your moment of decision about what is most important in your life hasn't come already, it's on its way. Or perhaps you

are in the throes of it now. The tragedy is not that you are being tested; the tragedy would be if you should fail to keep faith with God and therefore miss finding out what He wants to use the tested-and-approved you to do for Him in this world and beyond.

Conclusion

There is no inherent power in faith itself. The value of faith is in its object. A strong faith in an unworthy object will disappoint, while a weak faith in a worthy object will bring triumph and joy. Abraham's faith was fixed on the God and it was Jehovah-jireh who saw him through that ordeal. That he appears to have been so serene in the process testifies to the strength of his faith – at this point in his life. There are times and situations in his pilgrimage when he could not have surmounted so great a test! The terrible ordeals he and Sarah had gone through long before had prepared him for the trial with Isaac.

A missionary to the Congo once told the story of how older men served as night sentries for Christian workers among them. They were very much the living telephone lines from house to house, compound to compound. One evening she went to the door to receive a note that had been brought by a man everyone called Papa John. There was neither moonlight nor street light at their station, and she could barely make out his form by the light from his six-inch kerosene lantern with its smoky chimney. Thinking what a pitiful light he had for such a dark tropical night, she said, "That lamp doesn't give you much light, does it, Papa John?" "No, it doesn't," came the reply, "but it shines as far as I can step."

Trust God for today, for the Now. He will give as much light for as far as you can step. So believe this much, obey all that you know and do what is right according to His will. Commit your way to Him and He will direct your path. Jehovah-jireh will provide.