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ABRAHAM’S SUPREME TEST

Genesis 22:1 – 24

From the beginning when Abraham obeyed God to leave Ur of the Chaldees, God had promised him a Land as well as the Lad through whom Abraham would become a great nation. These promises were repeated and enlarged many times during the years of his pilgrimage in Canaan, but Abraham and Sarah had to wait twenty-five years before Isaac was born.

Isaac was Abraham’s link to the promised deliverer that God had promised to Adam in Genesis 3:15. Through Isaac and his line, the ultimate Seed of the woman would come, which is the Lord Jesus Christ. Abraham had already sacrificed Ishmael his natural son, by sending him away; now God required him to give up his supernatural son as the burnt offering. This was Abraham’s supreme test of faith, probably the greatest test that any of God’s servants have ever endured.

Now, those with unregenerate minds have charged God with cruelty to command Abraham to sacrifice his own son. These critics likened God to the bloodthirsty idols of Canaan that required human sacrifices. However, far from proving the cruelty of the true and living God, Abraham’s sacrifice points us to the love of God. Abraham’s near sacrifice of Isaac pointed prophetically to God’s actual sacrifice of His only begotten Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, on the cross for guilty sinners. We recall that magnificent verse of God’s love for sinners in…

John 3:16 “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

Here in Genesis 22, the focus is on Abraham’s faith, not Isaac’s submission. We have clarity about the theme because of Abraham’s immediate response to God in Genesis 22:1 & 11, where he said, “Here am I.” So let us begin our study of Abraham’s Supreme Test. We look first at…

I. The Test of Abraham’s Faith.
Genesis 22:1  “And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am.”

The phrase “after these things” sets us in the context of the recent events in Abraham’s life. He had moved from Mamre to the south of the Promised Land, where he settled eventually in Beersheba. There in Beersheba, Isaac was born. When Isaac was weaned at the age of three, Hagar and Ishmael were expelled from the household. Then the Philistines visited Abraham to make a peace treaty with him. Therefore “after these things”, Abraham must have lived quietly for a number of years. There was peace in the place where he lived with his wife and son, but Abraham’s peaceful world was about to be shattered.

Abraham heard the voice of God and said, “Behold, here I am.” We read that God called upon Abraham to “tempt” him, but this word does not mean “to entice.” Rather, this word translated “tempt” in the King James Version is better expressed as “prove” or “test.” Now, as the readers of the text, we know that God is testing Abraham. But Abraham did not know that God was only testing him, and that there would not be an actual sacrifice of Isaac in the end.

Genesis 22:2  “And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.”

God told Abraham to bring Isaac to a mountain in the land of Moriah. According to 2 Chronicles 3:1, the land of Moriah is in the vicinity of the future Jerusalem. This is the place where Solomon would built his temple. At Moriah, Abraham was to sacrifice Isaac as the burnt offering. As for Christ, He was crucified outside Jerusalem on the hill named Golgotha or Calvary.

At first reading, it would seem that God was mocking Abraham by stressing his relationship to Isaac. Why did God say, “Thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest”? Why couldn’t God have just called Isaac by name?

The insistent repetition of the noun “son” makes this the key word. This word is used ten times in the chapter to emphasize the severity of the sacrifice. By stressing his relationship to Isaac, Abraham’s emotions would certainly be heightened during the test.

Yet, God’s emphasis on the father-son relationship was assurance to Abraham that God knew perfectly what He had asked Abraham to do. The language also shows God’s awareness of Abraham’s struggle through the test. The question is: was Abraham prepared to give up Isaac for God, or had his only beloved son replaced God in his heart?

Humanly speaking, God’s command did not seem to make sense. God had promised Abraham a son through whom would come a great nation. Isaac was the key to the promise, but now God is telling him to take the life of his son! Moreover, a burnt offering means that Isaac would be sacrificed in the same way as a lamb: his throat would be slit, blood would be drained from his body, and his dead body would be burnt on the altar. How Abraham must have wrestled with these horrible thoughts in his mind!

Besides the sacrifice, Abraham tussled with the apparent contradiction of God’s promise and His command. Through Isaac, there would be a great nation, and there would come the deliverer who would crush the head of the serpent. But now, God wanted Abraham
to sacrifice the son of the promise as the burnt offering. How would God’s covenantal promises be fulfilled without Isaac?

However difficult the problem, there is no contradiction with God! We have finite minds that create problems in our thinking, so the things we cannot understand often appear to us as contradictions. But we are assured there is no contradiction with God.

This brings us to…

II. The Tension in Abraham’s Faith.

Genesis 22:3 “And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him.”

As confounding and as emotionally-charged that the command seemed to him, Abraham obeyed God immediately. He rose up early in the morning. The last time he rose up early in the morning to obey God was when he sent Hagar and Ishmael away. Notice the deliberate manner in which the narrator builds up the tension, as if in slow-motion. Moses does not rush through the details of Abraham’s preparation for the sacrifice of Isaac.

We follow step-by-step Abraham as he “saddled his ass”, “took two of his young men with him”, took Isaac, split wood for the burnt offering, “rose up”, and then set out on his journey to the place of the sacrifice. During his preparation, we do not hear Abraham ever doubting, debating, bargaining, or delaying his actions. Every step and every act of Abraham was purposeful.

Genesis 22:4-5 “4 Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off. 5 And Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you.”

The journey from Beersheba to Moriah took three days. The three-day journey “chiefly speaks of the protracted test and sustained obedience” of Abraham (Derek Kidner, p. 153-55). Along the way, he could have lost his nerve, changed his mind about the sacrifice, and decided to turn back. But Abraham did not make a U-turn.

When they arrived in Moriah, Abraham instructed his servants to wait for their return. His parting words to the two servants were no empty phrase. In Hebrew, the grammar indicates that Abraham and Isaac would return together to the place where the servants waited. After worshipping God in the mountain. Abraham fully expected to come back with Isaac.

Now, there is much discussion about Abraham’s thoughts and emotions through this test. He didn’t understand how God’s promise would be fulfilled, if he carried out the sacrifice of his son. But faith is believing God and acting on His word. Our finite minds can never fully understand God’s commands to us, but by faith we can leave the difficulty with God, assured that He does all things well. Abraham had learned through experience that God is entirely trustworthy, so he believed and obeyed God, even though he could not envisage a solution to the difficulty.
As he thought of God’s promise and the problem raised by the command, Abraham came to the settled assurance that the sacrifice of Isaac would not mean the end of his son. Abraham was certain that God would return Isaac alive to him. In Hebrews 11, the inspired writer reveals to us Abraham’s faith for the return of Isaac in…

Hebrews 11:17-19  “By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, 18 Of whom it was said, That in Isaac shall thy seed be called: 19 Accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure.”

God is the author of life, so it is a small matter for the Creator to bring life back into a dead body. So the one clear conclusion to Abraham is that God will perform a bodily resurrection. He was sure that God will raise Isaac from the dead! Thus with faith and resolve, Abraham proceeded to sacrifice his son.

Genesis 22:6  “And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together.”

All this while, Isaac had watched his father very closely and he noticed that there was something missing in the preparation.

Genesis 22:7  “And Isaac spake unto Abraham his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?”

Where was it? Where was the sacrifice? This was the question of the innocent victim, and oh, how it must have broken his father’s heart! Isaac was as unsuspecting as a sacrificial lamb. He is being led as a lamb to the slaughter.

Genesis 22:8-9  “And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together. 9 And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood.”

Abraham’s answer to Isaac, “God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering,” means that he understood the principle of a substitutionary atonement. Abraham understood that Isaac wasn’t the perfect offering; his son wasn’t the lamb without blemish, so he would not be acceptable to God. “Abraham couldn’t give the fruit of his body for the sin of his soul.” (Edmund P. Clowney, Preaching Christ in All Scripture, p. 73). Here we think of God’s judgment against Egypt. When God sent His final plague against the firstborn of Egypt, the firstborn of the children of Israel were also under the same threat of death. The Israelites needed a substitute to die in their place, so God provided them with the Passover Lamb as the acceptable sacrifice. By applying the blood of the innocent lamb on the doorposts of their homes, the Death Angel would pass over them (Exodus 12:1-13).

Genesis 22:10-11  “And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. 11 And the angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I.”
Now, Isaac was a strong lad. He walked up the mountain with the burden of wood on his own shoulders. If he wanted, he could have resisted or run away from the altar. But Isaac put up no resistance; he stayed put on the altar, silent as a lamb before the sacrifice. Isaac’s attitude shows that Abraham had taught his son well about worship, obedience and faith in God.

As for Abraham, we must not think that he went through the motions of the sacrifice and delayed bringing down the knife on his son, all the while hoping for God to stop him at the last possible moment. He did not expect God to stay his hand. This was a real test! We must also not think that God intervened in the nick of time and this was a ‘close shave.’ God knew that Abraham fully intended to carry out the sacrifice. There was no hesitation on Abraham’s part, until the angel of the LORD called out to stop him. The angel of the LORD is the preincarnate appearance of Christ in the Old Testament. This incident was a poignant moment for the angel of the LORD because some two thousand years later, Christ would Himself be crucified on the cross. However for Christ, no shout from Heaven stopped His crucifixion. God the Father did not spare His own Son.

When God called him to the test, Abraham answered, “Here am I.” Now at the end of the test, God called him again. Ponder the lesson here. If we want God to show us His will, we must be prepared to obey Him immediately. God has given us so many commands in the Bible which are clear-cut, such as the right person for marriage, the proper way to worship God, sharing the Gospel, and relationships with people. If we are not obeying God’s revealed commands, why should we expect Him to point out more specific areas of concern to us?

III. The Triumph of Abraham’s Faith.

Genesis 22:12 “And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me.”

Abraham hadn’t always been faithful, but the testimony of the angel about his fear of God shows us that in this climactic test of his faith, he triumphed. Abraham has proven that he will obey God and do everything that God commands him.

Genesis 22:13 “And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son.”

Indeed, God provided himself a lamb for the burnt offering, just as Abraham believed. Why was the ram caught in a thicket? It has been pointed out that the animal was caught in a thicket to restrain it from cutting and bruising itself, for the sacrificial lamb must not be blemished. Before Christ was crucified, He was beaten and whipped, and His visage was marred. The prophet said that there was “no form nor comeliness;” [and] “no beauty that we should desire him” (Isaiah 53:2). However, Christ is the perfect sacrifice acceptable to God, the perfect Lamb of God without blemish because there was no sin found in Him.

Genesis 22:14 “And Abraham called the name of that place Jehovah-jireh: as it is said to this day, In the mount of the LORD it shall be seen.”
Until the time that the angel called out to Abraham to stop his sacrifice of Isaac, God is named as Elohim the Creator. We notice the use of the name God in Genesis 22:1, 3, 8, & 9. But after the test, God is addressed as the LORD or Jehovah. Jehovah-jireh is the name of God now revealed to Abraham. This name of God means ‘The LORD will provide’ or ‘The LORD will see to it.’ ‘Provide’ is a secondary meaning of the simple verb ‘to see’. Thus we have the proverb, "In the mount of the LORD it shall be seen." When we are in the place of God’s will, He will see to our provisions! He will meet our needs; He will give to us what is required.

Names are carefully used to emphasize particular aspects of God’s relationship to His people. The name Jehovah emphasizes God’s covenantal relationship with Abraham and his descendants. God will keep His covenant with Abraham.

Genesis 22:15-16 “15 And the angel of the LORD called unto Abraham out of heaven the second time, 16 And said, By myself have I sworn, saith the LORD, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son:"

There is no authority greater than God Himself, so He swore by Himself. God rewarded Abraham for passing the supreme test by reiterating His promise to His servant.

Genesis 22:17-18 “17 That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; 18 And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice.”

In Genesis 15:6 we read that Abraham "believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness." Now God commended Abraham’s faith which is proven by his obedience to God. Our obedience to God proves the reality and quality of our faith.

Genesis 22:19 “So Abraham returned unto his young men, and they rose up and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham dwelt at Beer-sheba.”

The chapter ends with the little section about the family of Nahor, the brother of Abraham.

Genesis 22:20-24 “20 And it came to pass after these things, that it was told Abraham, saying, Behold, Milcah, she hath also born children unto thy brother Nahor; 21 Huz his firstborn, and Buz his brother, and Kemuel the father of Aram, 22 And Chesaed, and Hazo, and Pildash, and Jidlaph, and Bethuel. 23 And Bethuel begat Rebekah: these eight Milcah did bear to Nahor, Abraham’s brother. 24 And his concubine, whose name was Reumah, she bare also Tebah, and Gaham, and Tharaoh, and Maacah.”

The name that stands out in Nahor’s household is Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel. Rebekah was God’s provision as the bride of Isaac. With the news of his brother’s expanded household, Abraham would know how to continue the line of Isaac after he and Sarah were gone.

Conclusion
The theme of Genesis 22 is God’s test of Abraham’s faith. Abraham brought his son Isaac to the sacrifice, but when he was about to kill his son for the burnt offering God stopped him.

God often uses adversity or hardship to test the quality of our faith. Like Abraham, “Our faith is not really tested until God asks us to bear what seems unbearable, do what seems unreasonable, and expect what seems impossible.” (Warren Wiersbe, Be Basic, p. 109-10). God does not test us to lead us into sin, but to test the quality of who and what we are. The proof of what we are is what we do. If we have faith in God, we will obey Him.

Abraham and Isaac journeyed three days to reach Moriah. But God our Heavenly Father planned the sacrifice of His Son for us, not over three days, not over three thousand years, but from eternity past. According to Revelation 3:8, Christ is the “Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.”

Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac also foreshadowed the sacrifice of Christ. God’s provision of the ram on Mount Moriah typifies His sacrifice of Christ. Ultimately, God provided the Lamb of God to die as the substitute for His elect people so that they might live.

Like Isaac, Christ is a lamb led to the slaughter, yet He does not open His mouth. Just as Isaac carried his own wood up the steep mount, Christ carried His own cross to Golgotha. Symbolically, Abraham received Isaac back from death, which typified the resurrection of Christ from the dead.

Now let me ask you: do you have an acceptable sacrifice for your sins? Your good works, charity, personal worth, religious zeal, are all not acceptable sacrifices to God for your sins! From the beginning, God had provided a sacrifice for Himself. When Adam and Eve sinned against God, the LORD sacrificed an animal and used its skin to cover the nakedness of our sinful first parents (Genesis 3:21). God provided the sacrifice in place of Isaac, and then God provided the Passover Lamb for the Israelites. All of these sacrifices pointed to the perfect sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ is the perfect Lamb of God, “which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Do you know the Lord Jesus Christ as your personal Saviour? If you have asked Christ to be your Saviour, then you have Him as your sin-bearer.

Without the perfect sacrifice of Christ, there is no forgiveness for our sins. So come now to the Lord Jesus Christ and ask Him to be your personal Saviour. Through Christ, God will forgive you and save your soul!

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