

## **“The Test”**

Today we have one of those traditional Bible stories we first learned about as children. I recall learning about Abraham, that he would be the father of many nations, and the miracle that Sarah became pregnant and then had Isaac. We then we have the story today in Genesis 22:1-14. God tells Abraham to take Isaac, his only son (Ishmael has been banished) and offer him as a burnt offering on Mount Moriah. Ultimately God intervenes, tells Abraham to not kill Isaac, and provides a ram for the sacrifice.

There is much to this story we will examine. But initially it appears to be a great contradiction. After going to so much trouble to make sure Abraham had a biological heir in Isaac, why is God now requiring Abraham to kill him? Doesn't that totally contradict the whole idea of God's promise to Abraham that he will be the father of many? What's going on here?

We have to understand that the first purpose of this command was to prove Abraham. God had to test Abraham and make sure he had complete faith in God. The purpose is to test, not to teach, which is important to distinguish. Abraham is not being taught a lesson here. God has to make sure that Abraham is up to following through with the promise and making sure he fears God.

At times, after receiving the promise that he would be the father of many nations and that God would bless him and his offspring, Abraham at times had shown a distrust of God. Although generally faithful to God, Abraham had not shown the fear of God he needed to show.

What God commands of Abraham is the ultimate test. Isaac is now Abraham's only son and will be the only son he will ever have. He will be required to give up what he truly loves. He will have to take action, not just say he has faith in God. Abraham was once given a test in Genesis 12 when he was told by God to pack up and leave his life. This command cut him off from his past. The command to sacrifice Isaac potentially cuts Abraham off from his future.

Throughout the story Abraham understands that God has his best interests in mind. He exhibits faith during the whole journey. He says to God several times, "Here I am" (think of our hymn today "Here I am Lord."). He obeys God throughout because he trusts God. When Isaac starts to figure things out and wonders why there is no lamb for the burnt offering, Abraham responds that God will provide the lamb for the offering. During this whole story Abraham has faith that God will make sure God's plan is fulfilled.

The test focuses on Abraham's continuing trust in God. Will he stay the journey? What is vital to understand is that God does not know if Abraham will

past the test. This is not a God of predestination. This is really a Wesleyan story.

Adam's free will determines what is going to happen. God is testing Abraham's faithfulness to see if he will move into the future with him. God gives Abraham the ability to make his own choice. He gives us the ability to make our own choices.

Walter Brueggemann, renowned Old Testament scholar, says this is just as much a test for God. What will God do if Abraham does not pass the test? Who will do God's work?

As stated earlier, this is not a teaching moment. With the COVID-19 pandemic, there are a number of Christians who believe that it is a sign from God that people must repent from their ways. As I discuss in my newsletter article for July, I do not agree with this belief. Our God of grace will not infect people with a disease that injures or kills people to teach them something.

And a test is not the same as a teaching moment. Our story today is a test. God never intends for Isaac to be killed. In fact, God never tells Abraham to kill Isaac. He just says to present him "on the altar." God was always going to stop Abraham when it was clear that he feared God. In fact, a second purpose of this story was to express God's abhorrence of child sacrifice. This practice was, unfortunately, not uncommon in the cultures of that day. God wanted to make it clear that this was not appropriate.

In today's world, when relating this story to others for the first time, especially children, make sure you are clear that God never intended for this child to be sacrificed. Sadly, some has used this text to justify the abuse of children. So, we need to point out there is no justification for abuse in this text.

The third purpose of this story is to set forth the role of Jesus Christ. The New Testament use of the story is to understand the sacrifice of God's only son and constitutes an appropriate extension of the text (John 1:14). Why was the ram necessary? It was because there still had to be a sacrifice even when Isaac was not going to be sacrificed. These facts go to the substitutionary atonement theory that Christ was substituted for us so that our sins were forgiven. Under this theory, someone has to die for the sins of the world, and Christ's death substituted him for all the sins of the world. Even in Christ's case, though, ultimately there was not death. God raised him from the dead.

What is it we take from this story that is a lesson for our lives? When we have a relationship with the deity the people of God can expect to be put to the test again and again. These are not usually tests from God. They are life experiences. Are there absurd, senseless experiences in life that can become the occasion to turn away from God? There may be a deep, dark, and seemingly hopeless valley through which we travel. Especially those who have been given promises, if God

does not protect us (usually it is our perception that God does not protect us), will we turn away from God? We should learn from this story that receiving promises from God does not entail being protected from moments when those promises seemed to be called into question. How will we react to God when we are put to the test?

Moving to the New Testament, God does not expect of Abraham something that God would be unwilling to do. God puts Jesus through a time of testing in the desert for forty days to see if he will be faithful, and hence could be a vehicle for God's redemptive purposes in the world. God risked that Jesus would not be faithful. Think of the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus had a hard time when faced with the ultimate reality of death. But Jesus trusts himself to the will of God, trusting that God will find a way to be faithful even in the face of death. God proves faithful by raising Jesus from the dead.

Around 2008 I faced a test. I had come to the conclusion that I could no longer practice law. I was going crazy. I figured out later after therapy I was burnt out but didn't realize it then. I felt I had no purpose in life. I was highly disappointed. I had worked hard to be a lawyer. I thought this was my calling from God. But in 2008 I hated the practice of law. I had no idea what I was to do.

Initially, at the recommendation of my doctor, it required me to go to outpatient treatment for a week at the Carolina Center in Greenville. Normally people are treated there for mental illness and/or drug addictions. I was then required to go to a therapist once every three weeks for counselling. I was doing things I thought I would never do. I thought I could fix it myself.

I went to the therapist for three years. At first I had no idea what I was going to do. I continued to practice law but did not see that going on forever. About a year after my initial crisis, a friend invited me to attend Lee Road UMC. I had not rejected God but I had let my spiritual life wane.

The experience was wonderful. I felt love I had not felt in years from fellow church members. I learned much from the minister and the church members. I started to have a purpose in life. By the end of 2009, after a year and a half of therapy, my therapist asked me what I would do if Duke Divinity School offered me a full scholarship to go into the ministry. By the time, I had realized I was being called into the ministry.

The journey was still not easy. For years I had never considered the ministry my calling. When I was in law school 25 years earlier, I had told my aunt I would never become a minister. It was hard at first to admit that it was my calling when I was almost 50 years old. But after much prayer and reflection, I realized it was

now my calling. I also realized how my law practice and my growing up as a minister's child had helped prepare me for the ministry.

Going into pastoral ministry has been wonderful. My family supported me in going back to school for three years. God helped provide 80 percent of the monies I needed for tuition, books, and board. My experience in seminary as well as my life experiences, have been invaluable to my work as a pastor

If you have not already been tested in your faith, you will be. We do have the words of St. Paul in 1 Cor.10:13. "God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you will be able to maintain it." These affirmations do not make trust an option, but we can count on the faithfulness of God, who in the midst of the worst possible testing will provide a way through the fire.