

A Painful Lesson in Faith

Genesis 22:1-18

On a particularly beautiful day a man was walking along a mountain trail. Perhaps he was humming that well known tune
 I love to go a wandering along the mountain track
 And as I go I love sing my knapsack on my back.
 Val-deri, val-dera
 Val-deri, val-dera ha ha ha ha ha
 Val-deri, val-dera
 My knapsack on my back.

It may have been at that moment when he was contemplating the meaning of val-deri, val-dera that he slipped off the edge of a cliff. Sliding down the cliff he was able to grab onto a tree branch that stuck out from the face of the rock. As he hung there thinking about his options he started yelling, “is anyone up there?” He was surprised to hear a voice say to him, “Yes, this is God.” He was greatly relieved and quickly asked, “God, can you save me?” To which God exclaimed, “Of course I can.” Very happy to hear that his troubles were about over he asked God what he should do. God answered “let go of the branch.” After a long period of silence, the man replied, “Is there anyone else up there?”

If I were to give you a few moments of reflection what would you say was the hardest thing you have ever been asked to do or the hardest thing you have ever done?

Of all the passages and stories of Scripture other than the crucifixion, our passage today is perhaps the greatest example of faith and the clearest testimony of God’s provision through the promises He made.

It’s a greater lesson in faith than Joseph in an Egyptian prison.

It’s a greater lesson in faith than Joshua and the Israelites marching around Jericho.

It’s a greater lesson in faith than David standing before Goliath swinging his sling.

It’s a greater lesson in faith than Daniel spending the night in a lion’s den.

It’s a greater lesson in faith than Shadrach, Meshach and Ebednego getting tossed into a blazing fire.

It’s a greater lesson in faith than the disciples waiting in Jerusalem for the promised Comforter.

It’s a greater lesson in faith than our waiting for the return of Christ.

Turn with me to **Genesis 22:1-18** today.

If we are to believe that God provides we must come to the realization that His provision comes with our faith and obedience. Hebrews 11 is filled with examples of faith and obedience. Their faith reveals how God provides. But of all the examples of faith in Scripture and perhaps even throughout history, there is no one that compares to Abraham and his journey of faith. Yes, as we learned last week there were some blots on his faith record. He sometimes didn’t fully trust the Lord and took matters into his own hands or ran ahead of God. At times his faith was incomplete. But for 100 years he learned that God provides, that God does exactly what He says. He could trust God.

Last week I asked you to consider if you have left the land God has called you to or if God is calling you to leave the land you are in. It may not be a physical land or address. It may be leaving any number of things that may be causing you to walk by sight and not faith. How was your journey last week? Mine had some faith challenges.

This past week was a test for me of what I preached last week. **Did I really believe what I said? Am I willing to walk by faith believing in God’s promises and in His provision?** I like my week to be structured.

On Tuesday I study the passage for Sunday’s message.

On Wednesday I review my lesson for Prayer meeting and then study some more for the message.

On Thursday I put the message together and type it out.

On Friday I review the message and work on other things like Board meetings and Men's Bible study. That's a typical week with a few other things filling it all up.

If I had a large container I wanted to fill to demonstrate what the week look like, I would begin by putting in a large rock. The amount of space it takes up would represent the amount of time I spend in a given week on the message. Then I would add some large stones to represent the other studies I prepare for. I would follow that with pebbles to represent reading and administrative stuff and ministry meetings and then I would top it off with sand to represent emails and phone calls and general stuff.

This last week when I got the phone call from Wayne that his son-in-law passed away and they wanted me to do the funeral, I began to calculate the time to meet with the family, prepare for and conduct the funeral. So I had to stop and say okay, Lord, you know my week, now I'm going to trust You to provide a message for me and help me with everything else I have going on. Was I going to believe that God would provide? I'm not sure how well I did. I tried to rest in God's provision, but I know there were some pretty melancholy days. Robyn isn't here to confirm that. I said last week that every event of every day is a test of faith.

Today's passage is another test of faith. Although very familiar it is one that asks us to consider what is most precious to us. It is the story of Abraham and Isaac. We can look at the passage and make the correlation between Isaac as the type of Christ who would be sacrificed.

Both were precious to their father.

Both bore wood to a hill.

Both were to be sacrificed.

Both were offered on the same mountain.

In all the typology I don't want us to miss the essential component of the passage – that is man's faith and obedience and God's provision. While some believe the main idea here is about atonement, the key is really about the faithfulness of God to keep His promise when we obey in faith.

Gov. Mike Huckabee on his website, Godfruits posted this from an anonymous author that I thought was very good and fit well with our passage: "Faith to be "real" must be used, or it will seem useless. Theologian and cultural critic Os Guinness put it this way in his book, God in the Dark.

"The question the doubter does not ask is whether faith was really useless -- or simply not used. What would you think of a boy who gave up learning to ride a bicycle, complaining that he hurt himself because his bicycle stopped moving so he had no choice but to fall off? If he wanted to sit comfortably while remaining stationary, he should not have chosen a bicycle but a chair. Similarly, faith must be put to use, or it will become useless."

That brings to mind James 1:22-25.

"Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it--not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it--they will be blessed in what they do."

Let's all get on our bicycles of faith and start peddling madly. We have a long way to go!

For faith to be faith it must also have feet. At the age 75 God told Abraham to get up and go from his country and to leave his kin and God would make him a great nation through a son of promise. If

Abram was to believe the promise of God then he had to act on that promise as well. He had to go. **Robyn promised David that she would pay him \$4 for each hour he helped yesterday in the garden pulling up the old plants. For David to receive the promise of his mother he had to act in faith by going and doing.**

Remember that I said last week that no matter how old we are God always has another test of faith for us.

Joyce you're 39 and holding. Did you ever think in this past year you would encounter these tests of faith God brought into your life? We might think that it would make more sense for God to give us those tests of faith when we're younger and have more stamina and our faith is newer. But that's not the way God works. At the time of this test Abraham is 115 or so. It hadn't even been 50 years. Some of you have walked by faith longer than that. Is your faith stronger today than when you first began those many years ago?

Let's look together at this test of faith.

“Some time later God tested Abraham.” Here's a key point to remember – always expect testing from God. It will come at any time. Sometimes we barely have time to breathe from the previous one and He brings on another. Other times it may be a long stretch between His times of testing.

Isaac has been born. The fulfillment of God's promise came 25 years after God gave it. Abraham was 75 when he was called out of Ur of the Chaldeans and now he is 100 when Isaac was born. So we don't know how much time has passed between Isaac's birth and our passage but a considerable amount of time has passed. We learn in chapter 23 that Sarah was 127 when she died. She was 90 when Isaac was born. Scholars aren't sure how old Isaac was in chapter 22. Some believe he was a teenager, others believe he could have been in his mid to late 20's. Here's the thing we

need to keep in mind – he was old enough to know what was going on.

Something else is significant in that opening statement. It's the word test. According to James 1:13 God never tempts us to do wrong, but He will test our faith. It's a word that means to test thoroughly through a demonstration of stress.

You have no doubt seen the symbol of a circle with the letters UL in the center. That stands for Underwriter's Laboratory. They provide safety inspection on a variety of products by testing them to determine the validity of their claim.

When I worked in product assurance we tested the bonded joints of our disposable heart cannulas by putting them in a vice that measured how much force it would take to pull them apart. We were putting them under stress to make sure they would hold up during open heart surgery.

While wandering in the wilderness Moses had this to say from **Exodus 20:20 “Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning.”**

Deuteronomy 8:2 “Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep His commands.”

God was testing the heart of Abraham to see how much faith he really had. God was going to use this to further test the temper of the steel, to further purify the silver. Abraham had shown through the years a growing faith in God regarding the promises made to him. He had come to believe in the provisions of God, but to what degree would that faith go? God had one more test for His faithful servant.

I want you to notice something important about a

servant of God who is faithful. When God spoke Abraham responded immediately. **“Here I am.”** He had a ready ear to hear and a ready heart to respond. He had come to know the voice of God. For God to provide we also need to be ready to hear God’s voice and then be willing to respond. There are so many voices in our culture that are calling us, “come here, come here, come here.” It can be difficult to discern the God’s voice, but a person who walks by faith knows that voice well and when God’s voice calls your name you respond **“here I am.”**

In verse 2 we see the test. It’s in the form of a command. It’s stated in such a way that there can be no mistaking what God is asking Abraham to do. **“Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and to go the region of Moriah.”**

If we stop right there that sounds like a reasonable request. He knew who God was talking about. He didn’t say Ishmael, He said Isaac, take Isaac. Now God also uses language that describes the kind of relationship Abraham and Isaac had. There was a strong bond, a strong affection between the two. Remember this was the son of promise, the one through whom God’s promises would come a great nation that would bless all the nations of the world.

“Okay God I know who you mean. I’ll take Isaac and we’ll go walk around all this land so I can show him everything our people will one day possess. We’ll sit out under the stars and look at the vast number of them and talk about how great the nation will be. I can do that God.”

But that’s not what God had in mind.

“Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and to go the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.”

Talk about a jaw dropper and a heart stopper. **What would you think if God asked you to do that very same thing?**

Okay, some of you might be glad on certain days to give your child back to God.

What do you think was going through Abraham’s mind right then?

“God, you don’t really mean that do you? You’re just kidding right?”

Sometimes David will ask a question and I’ll give some answer to see how he’ll respond. At 8 he knows me pretty well and he say “You’re just joking right?”

Ok, God, that’s a good one. What do you really want me to do?

Ok, God, and just how do you propose I break this news to his mother?

Ok, God, You’ve asked me to do a lot of crazy stuff in my day, but this takes the cake.

Ok, God, let’s be reasonable here.

He could have been like Jonah and ran away.

Let me remind you of **Genesis 12:1-3 “The Lord had said to Abram, ‘Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever cruses you I will curse; and all peoples of earth will be blessed through you.’”**

Genesis 15:4-5 “Then the word of the Lord came to him: ‘This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir.’”

What do you think was Abraham’s response? I can tell you what it was.

Romans 4:20-21 “Abraham never wavered in believing God’s promise. In fact, his faith grew stronger, and in this he brought glory to God.

He was absolutely convinced that God was able to do anything He promised.” (NLT)

In short it didn't faze him. He may have been broken up about it, but he knew the right thing was to obey God. After all, he believed in the promise of God. He never wavered in his faith toward God. He never doubted God. He never had a moment of indecision. He did not vacillate or falter in his faith.

James 1:2-8

How about it folks? Do you think Abraham's faith was developing perseverance? Do you think that perseverance brought about God's perfect work in Abraham?

With unwavering faith Abraham continued to believe in the God of the possible, that there is nothing too hard for Him. He believed that even in sacrificing Isaac, God would raise him up from the dead because he was the son of promise. God would provide.

Hebrews 11:8-19

Do you believe that about God? How many of you would say that about God; that you believe Him; that He will provide what He promised?

Isaac represented what was most precious to Abraham. There wasn't anything that was dearer to him than that boy. Both he and Sarah were well past the years of childbearing and God miraculously brought it about because He said He would. Isaac was special to him. He embodied the promise of God and the future of his family. Isaac meant everything to him. He would do anything for that boy.

It is here that I want to pause and ask a very serious question, a question about your faith.

Who or what is your Isaac?

We all have one, something or someone that we hold most dear to our heart.

Our Isaac might be our spouse or our children or grandchildren.

Our Isaac might be a friend.

Our Isaac might be our job.

Our Isaac might be our home or our cottage.

Our Isaac might be our car or camper.

Our Isaac might be our bank account and retirement funds.

Our Isaac might be our hobby.

Our Isaac might be our time.

Our Isaac can be anyone or anything.

Who or what is your Isaac, that person or thing you hold most dear and if God asked you to take your Isaac and sacrifice it would you? Could you? Will you?

We sing it sometimes “**I surrender all.**” It means to give up possession, to give up claim to, to yield ownership to another with no intention of wanting it back.

In the Lord of the Rings, Bilbo has given up the ring of power to his nephew Frodo, but it still had a strong grip on him. In a chance meeting at Rivendell, home of the elves, Bilbo meets his nephew and once again lays eyes on the ring. Because it has consumed him, at one time calling it “my precious,” he barks at his nephew “give it to me, it's mine.”

When we surrender our Isaac to God, it is with the intention and understanding that it no longer belongs to us. We relinquish ownership but after all doesn't everything we own really belong to God?

Abraham, you have lived in this pagan land now for many years. All around you the Canaanites live and they serve Molech. Every year countless children are sacrificed out of worship for Molech by people who say they love their god. They willingly sacrifice their children out of devotion to a god that neither sees nor hears. As a matter of fact Molech isn't even alive. Here I am the living, true God,

Abraham. Do you love me as much as they love their god? Will you sacrifice to Me what you hold most dear to you just as they do to their god?

Beginning in verse 3 we see Abraham's response. **“Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac.”**

Would you agree that the longer you wait, the more likely you are to talk yourself out of obeying?

He didn't hang around hoping God would change His mind. He didn't question God? He didn't ignore God or disobey God. We don't hear that he held a special meeting with some trusted friends to ask their advice. It doesn't even say he told Sarah what God asked him to do. He got up early out of faith and obedience and headed out to obey. Remember we have said that faith and obedience go together.

They traveled to Moriah. I believe that every step as painful as it may have been further strengthened his faith. Every step away from home in obedience to God was a greater step of faith.

After three days, they left the two servants and Abraham with assurance in his voice told them they would return after worshipping God.

Eventually Isaac broke the silence and asked his father the \$64,000 question. **“We have the wood and the fire, but where is the sacrifice?”**

How that question must have rolled around in his head – **“where's the sacrifice?”** Here's where Abraham believed in God's provision.

“God will provide a lamb for the sacrifice.”

They reached the place God directed them to and he built the altar. We find in II Chronicles 3:1 that this is the place where Solomon had the Temple built. It is also the region of the mountain on which the cross was raised where Christ was crucified.

The altar was built, the wood was in place, now the sacrifice. How confusing it must have been for Isaac to learn that he was to be the sacrifice that day. He could have run, he could have resisted, he could have gotten away. That day Abraham bowed his will to the will of God. He died to self that day ever willing to follow in obedience the God who will provide. That day Isaac also bowed his will in obedience. He too had to come to the place of believing that God would provide what He promised. He too had to believe that God could and would raise him from the dead to fulfill the promise of a great nation through him as had been promised to his father.

For a second time in our passage a ready ear and a willing heart heard the voice of God calling and he answered **“Here I am.”** He was ever obedient to the voice of God. One moment he was willing to let his hand fly downward and thrust the knife into the chest of the son he loved and the next he was even more willing to stay his hand.

In their Old Testament Commentary Keil and Delitzsch write about Abraham - “The sacrifice was already accomplished in his heart – he had fully satisfied the requirements of God.”

God sees the sacrifice of the heart before the sacrifice of the hand. When I asked earlier about your Isaac, the person or thing God may ask you to give up in sacrifice to Him, it may be that God only wants to see if you are willing for His sake to give it up. He may return it to you. On the other hand, it may be that He is asking and expecting that you give it up. **Are you ready and willing?**

Ready and willing to sacrifice what was most precious to him, Abraham rested in both the promises and the provisions of God. He knew God could and would raise the dead to keep His Word.

God kept His promise and provided the sacrifice they needed. Stuck in a bush was a ram. Notice it

is not a lamb. A lamb would one day become a sacrifice, but not that day and He would be our sacrifice. Baptizing in the Jordan River one day John the Baptist exclaimed to the crowd **“behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.”**

In verse 14 Abraham gave a name to the mountain. It was a name that Abraham used to signify something new he had learned about God – **“The Lord will provide.”** In the Hebrew it’s Jehovah-jireh. It literally means the Lord will see to it.

Hudson Taylor, missionary to China said that **“when God’s work is done in God’s way, it will not lack God’s support.”** Abraham learned that day that God provides just what we need at just the right time. **Do you believe that about Him today?** He will provide.

About this passage Warren Wiersbe suggests several important points.

Expect tests from God

Focus on the promises of God not the explanations

Depend on God’s promises

Look forward to what God has for you

He goes on to say that **“Our faith is not really tested until God asks us to bear what seems unbearable, do what seems unreasonable, and expect what seems impossible. Faith does not demand explanations, faith rests on promises.”**

Abraham proved that day that he loved God with all his heart, mind, soul, and strength more than his most precious earthly possession. Once again God spoke to Abraham and reaffirmed the promise of a nation and the promise of blessing all the nations through him.

How joyful that journey back home must have been. His burden had been lifted, but his resolve to follow God was never stronger. God promised. God provided. God proved.

Let us never forget that God will provide what He has promised, but we must act in faith and step out in obedience.

Author Ken Hemphill writes **“Too many of us are missing the joy of seeing God’s blessings fully realized in our lives because we are tenaciously clinging to that which seems most precious. We argue with God that we can’t possibly put our career or our family on the altar, because it is the only thing that we have of value. The problem is that we have taken possession of what God gave to us in stewardship.”**

Are you willing to let go of your Isaac today?