

Faith that is Tested

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[0 : 00] Gracious Father, we do thank you again for your word. We thank you for this series that is almost at an end, looking at the life of Abraham. And Father, we do pray this morning as we look at his life again, that you might teach us from your word, that we might continue to trust and obey you.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, our children have some school tests coming up, and it reminded me of some other children who gave some slightly amusing answers to their school tests. So a student on a history test was asked on the next slide, what ended in 1896? They wrote 1895. I'm not sure that's the answer they're after.

On a maths test, another student was asked on the next slide to find X. He said, here it is. I'm not sure that's what they're after either. And then on the next slide, it's a bit hard to see this one, but there's a series of questions.

The first question was, in which battle did Napoleon die? The student said, his last one. Where was the Declaration of Independence signed? At the bottom of the page. River Ravi flows in which state?

[1 : 15] Liquid state. They're true answers. And I love how the teacher gave him an F for the test, but an A for creativity. Now, no student I know enjoys tests, but they are actually helpful for two reasons.

Firstly, they help you grow as you study and commit to memory everything you've learned. And secondly, it helps you prove how much you have learned. Of course, it can also prove how much you haven't learned, too.

But school tests are designed not to make students fail, but to help them grow and prove how much they know. And there are times in the Christian life where our faith is also tested.

And when we have a choice whether we will trust God or not, even if the situation doesn't make sense to us, or it feels like God doesn't know what he's doing anymore.

These times are times of testing, and Satan will use these times to tempt us to fail. But God uses these times to test us in order to grow, to prove our faith genuine, just like school tests.

[2 : 30] In fact, God can even use these times to achieve his purposes for others as well. And this is what we see in our chapter today, where God famously tests Abraham.

So we're at point one in your outlines and verse one in your Bibles. Sometime later, God tested Abraham. He said to him, Abraham, here I am, he replied.

Then God said, take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain, I will show you.

Now, no doubt this was a huge test for Abraham. It was a hard word from God to believe and accept. In fact, if it wasn't for our author telling us as the readers what was happening in verse one, you know, the test, we too would find this too hard to believe.

And we might well wonder, is this God a God worth following? But it is a test. And God himself knows how big it is. When God says in verse two, take your son, your only son, whom you love.

[3 : 42] It is not God trying to make it harder for Abraham to put the boot in. That's what sinful humans do. Rather, there's a word missing at the beginning of verse two.

It's the word please. God doesn't use this word very often, actually. He says, please take your son, your only son. In other words, the tone here is gentle.

And so the repeated language about Isaac is not God deliberately making it harder for Abraham. Rather, it's God saying, I understand how precious Isaac is to you and the enormity of what I'm asking you to do.

Of course, the language also points us to another only son who would be sacrificed years later. Hint, hint, nudge, nudge. Now, God will never tell us, just to be clear, God will never tell us to

sacrifice our child or grandchild.

I'll tell you why later. But sometimes we will be in situations where it feels like he doesn't know what he's doing. Where we can't see the bigger picture.

[4 : 49] Where his word seems too hard for us to accept or believe. Whether it's because of society or because of suffering. I know of a man whose sister is gay and now wants to marry her girlfriend.

As she thinks God's word on marriage and gender is unloving. Even though it is possible to love others and still disagree with them. And this man feels for her deeply.

It's his sister. But will he trust God's word or not? For others I know of, they've been suffering for some time. And despite their prayers, nothing has changed.

God's word says he loves us and hears our prayers and knows what he's doing. But it doesn't feel like it. Will they keep trusting God or not?

And for Abraham, he has waited 25 years for Isaac to be born. He loves Isaac. And what's more, God has just said last week on the next slide that it is through Isaac that God's promises of nation and so on will come.

[6 : 05] And so to tell Abraham to sacrifice Isaac was effectively to tell Abraham to kill God's promises. Like a great nation and blessing for all nations.

Abraham could well have felt like God didn't know what he was doing. And so will he trust or not? Well, he does. Because he obeys. Point to verse 3.

Early the next morning, Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. And he took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. And when he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about.

Abraham obeys almost straight away, doesn't he? He rises early the very next morning. Unless we think this was easy obedience for Abraham. I mean, it's Abraham. It would have been easy for him. It's hard for us. Notice in verse 3 how the author kind of slows down the scene a little by describing each action he does. He doesn't say Abraham set off.

[7 : 08] He says he got up, loaded his donkey, got his two servants, got his son, got the wood. Giving these details slows the scene down so that we might feel the weight of this with Abraham.

This is not easy for him. In fact, Abraham seems to even do things in the wrong order. So he packs his donkey first and then he cuts the wood.

Wouldn't it be the other way around? I mean, have you ever been so stressed or preoccupied that you don't think straight? I remember one morning I had so much on my mind that I ended up putting the cereal in the fridge and the milk in the cupboard.

Have you ever done something like that? Someone told me this morning it's not stress, it's old age. Hang on, hang on. But that's the kind of picture we get of Abraham here.

Packing his donkey without the wood then going back to cut it. This is hard for him to obey. But he does. He sets off and reaches Mount Moriah on the third day.

[8 : 07] Verse 4. 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. Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son, Isaac. And he himself carried the torch of fire, the fire torch and the knife. And as the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father, Abraham, Father, yes, my son, Abraham replied. The fire and the wood are here, Isaac said. But where is the lamb for the burnt offering?

Abraham answered, God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son. And the two of them went on together. Now, I don't know if you felt this, but it almost feels like Abraham is telling lies, doesn't it?

In verse 5, he told his servants that he and Isaac would go over there and worship and that they would both come back. But isn't he going to kill Isaac? And then in verse 8, Isaac asks about the lamb and Abraham says, well, God's going to provide the lamb.

[9 : 15] But isn't Isaac supposed to be the burnt offering lamb? So is Abraham lying? Or is he so upset he can't think straight? Or is it that he really trusts God?

You see, while Abraham cannot see the bigger picture of what God is doing in verse 1, you know, testing him, he can see the most important person in the picture, God. And so it's the same for when we are tested, by the way.

We can't see the bigger picture, but we know the most important person in the picture, God. And like us, Abraham knew God has kept his promises in the past. I mean, Isaac was living proof. And so as Abraham traveled for three days to Mount Moriah, no doubt he had time to think about all this. And he reasoned that if God had already kept his promise in the past, he would keep his promises in the future, including through Isaac.

He reasoned that God will somehow keep Isaac alive. Perhaps God would, therefore, provide a substitute lamb, as he says in verse 8. Or maybe God would even raise Isaac from the dead, as we heard in our second reading.

[10:28] Do you remember that? It's on the next slide. There's the promise again. You know, through Isaac shall your offspring be called or be reckoned. And Abraham reasoned, it's a thinking word, reasoned that God was able even to raise him from the dead.

You see? And so Abraham's words in verse 5 and verse 8 are not lies, nor are they blind faith. Rather, after three days of thinking about it, his words are a demonstration of reasoned faith. Faith based on the evidence of God's past actions. And so his words, he show that Abraham genuinely trusted, had faith in God.

It's not just his words that show that, it's his actions as well. Because he obeys right up to the end. Do you see verse 9? When they had reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there, then arranged the wood on it, and he bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar on top of the wood.

Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. Abraham obeys completely, doesn't he?

[11:47] Right up to the end almost. Abraham still obeyed. Even though he couldn't see the bigger picture. Even though it probably felt like God didn't know what he was doing. Abraham still obeyed.

In fact, even Isaac obeys, did you notice? Isaac was old enough to carry the wood up the hill. So what, 9, 10 years old, something like that. If he was old enough to carry wood up the hill, then he's old enough to run away from his crazy old man, over 100 years old, trying to kill him.

But he doesn't. He obeys his father and willingly went bound to the altar. And again, unless we think this was easy for Abraham, as you notice our author again slows down the action, describes each step by step, so that we might feel the weight of it.

And despite how hard this was, Abraham still obeys, right to the point of drawing his knife. And in so doing, he proves that his faith in God is genuine, doesn't he?

As God says through his angel in verse 12, Now I know that you fear God. Or in the words of New Testament passage from James on the next slide, James chapter 2, he says, Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?

[13:06] You see that his faith and his actions were working together. And his faith was made complete or proved genuine by what he did.

I was trying to teach this concept of how our actions prove our faith, or lack of, to a youth group at my old church. And so I did this experiment with pendulums.

You know what a pendulum is? I've just fleeced the mouse from the office here. Don't tell anyone. Don't tell anyone. But it's a string with a weight at the bottom. And the rule of pendulums is that it never returns to the same spot.

So if you let it go, it just won't come back, and then it slowly loses energy. But for the youth group kids, I wanted to make it a bit more fun. So I got a huge rope, tied a bowling ball to the bottom of it, strapped it to the roof of the church hall.

I wasn't the senior minister then, so I could do these crazy things. And then I said to the kids, I want you to hold the ball up to your chin, and I promise you, when it comes back, it will not hit you.

[14:06] Do you trust me? Do you fear me more than the bowling ball? I really wish I had a video of this, because they had some funny reactions, but I found another video of some college students doing the same thing to illustrate the point.

Take a look and tell me which one had genuine faith. Which one had genuine faith?

It's pretty obvious, isn't it? The first one, it was actually the teacher. You see, our actions demonstrate our faith, don't they? And did you notice how relaxed the teacher was? He was showing off a bit, you know, folding his arms, too cool for school kind of thing.

You see, he'd done this before, and so his faith wasn't only proved genuine, it had grown to the point where he was so comfortable he could cross his arms. But again, that's what tests do.

They not only prove our faith genuine, but they also grow us in faith. And this seems to have happened here for Abraham too. Because in the past, Abraham feared for his life, do you remember?

[15 : 24] So much so that he lied about his wife, Sarah, twice. Chapter 12, chapter 20. And the word fear is used on both occasions. But this test here in chapter 22 forced Abraham to choose whether he would fear for himself and his son again, or whether he would fear God more.

And verse 12 tells us he fears God more. You see, this test not only proved his faith genuine, it actually grew his faith from chapter 12 and chapter 20. In fact, after this chapter, we never see Abraham's faith falter again.

Admittedly, he only lives for another three chapters, but he never falters again. The point is, the test has both proved his faith genuine and grown it. And the New Testament talks about this growing aspect as well.

So on the next slide, James chapter 1 this time, he says, Now don't mishear James.

He's not saying we're to consider the trial joyful. Oh, I've lost my job. Yes, I'm so joyful. Or I've got, I'm sick. I'm so, no, no, it's not the trial to be joyful.

[16 : 43] It's what God is doing through the trial that is a cause for joy, growing us in maturity. But why is growing our faith and proving it genuine such a big deal?

Well, because faith is the difference between being welcomed into heaven or suffering in hell. Peter puts it like this on the next slide.

He says, For a little while, you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials or tests. It's the same word. These have come so that your faith, which is of greater worth than gold, a gold perishes, even though refined by fire, your faith may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

That praise, glory, and honor refers to both Christ and ours when Jesus says, Well done, good and faithful servant. You see, it matters that our faith is proved genuine.

It's worth more than gold because it determines where we spend eternity. And so you want to know it's genuine and you want to grow in your faith and persevere in it.

[17 : 58] And God uses tests to do both like he does here with Abraham. In other words, God tests us for our good. And when he does, we are to respond like Abraham.

We are to trust and obey that our faith might be proved genuine and even grow. For then it will result in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Well, having passed the test, God now provides, read to a final point, point three in verse 11. The angel of the Lord called out, intervened to Abraham from heaven.

Abraham, Abraham, here I am, he replied. Do not lay a hand on the boy. He said, Do not do anything to him. Now that I know you fear God because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.

And Abraham looked up and there in the thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son.

[19 : 00] So Abraham called the place the Lord will provide. And to this day it is said, On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided. So here God clearly provides for Abraham, doesn't he?

And he provides an intervention to start with and then a sacrificial substitute. Abraham reasoned back in verse 8 that God might provide a lamb and pretty close God provides a ram.

Now it's interesting that God's provision here comes right at the last minute, doesn't it? When the knife's up in the air. And then the angel calls out and the ram appears. But often God works like that, doesn't he?

Why? Well again, because it forces us to trust him and to exercise our faith. If life was always easy, if God answered our prayers straight away, then we'd end up using prayer like a magic charm.

Oh, something's wrong, I'll pray, boom, got it done. But if God holds off, then he forces us to trust him, to wait and trust him.

[20 : 03] It forces us to exercise our faith. And like other things in life, the more we exercise it, the fitter and stronger it becomes. And while God's provision often comes at the last minute and not always in the ways we expect, it does come.

In the words of another part of the Bible, in Hebrews 4, he provides grace to help us in our time of need. But God doesn't just provide a substitute for Abraham.

He also provides an oath to reassure him. Have a look at verse 15. The angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven a second time.

He 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.

[21 : 10] Here, God reassures Abraham and provides an oath, doesn't he? He declares an oath, a guarantee that he will deliver on his promises.

It's like God puts his promises in writing. In fact, I promised my children the other day that they could have Subway for dinner and one of them wanted me to put it in writing and sign it.

Little rotter. But that's what God does here by swearing an oath. He's providing a guarantee to Abraham because God wants him to know that his promises will be kept.

And then that's the other thing about this test. You see, God not only tests Abraham to prove his faith genuine and to grow it, he also tests Abraham to teach us and encourage us too.

How? Well, firstly, by teaching us that his promises are unstoppable. He's made an oath. All nations will be blessed through Abraham's offspring.

[22 : 21] It's going to happen. In fact, when the Israelites are about to enter the promised land, 16 times in the book of Deuteronomy, they refer back, Moses refers back to this oath here in Genesis 22 to encourage them.

The land is yours. God will keep his promise. Go in and take it. I think on the next slide it might be from Deuteronomy 1. Don't forget the oath. Of course, they sinned and didn't stay in the land and now we in Christ are Abraham's heirs and we look to our own heavenly promised land.

And then even in Hebrews, they refer back to this oath here in Genesis 22 to encourage us. In other words, God tests Abraham not just for his good but for our good.

that we might know he will keep his promises. He's sworn an oath, put them in writing. And not just to encourage us with this oath but also to teach us about his son.

See, the other reason he tests Abraham and tells him to sacrifice his son is so that we might learn a promised offspring of Abraham needs to die.

[23 : 34] I said before that God will never tell us to sacrifice our kids or grandkids because in the Bible he hates that practice.

In fact, I think if you go back a slide, there's a couple of examples about how he hates people sacrificing children and says anyone who does it will be put to death themselves. And so the question we need to ask is why does he tell Abraham to do that?

Well, in part because he was teaching us and Israel that the promised offspring of Abraham, like Isaac, would one day have to be sacrificed to pay for sin so that, verse 18, all nations could be blessed through this offspring.

And which one of Abraham's promised offspring acts like Isaac? Starts with G's, ends with this. You know it, right?

Jesus. I mean, did you notice how many ways Isaac reminds us of Jesus? Did you notice in the story? I mean, there's an obvious one, your son, your only son, John 3.16.

[24 : 42] Whom I love, that's what God says to Jesus at his baptism, Mark 1.11. Where did Abraham put the wood? On his son Isaac, who carries his cross, wooden cross.

Jesus. And on it goes. You see, God is testing Abraham, not just for his good to prove his faith and grow it, but for our good that we might have the oath that he will keep his promise and we might understand what it's going to cost God to be blessed.

It's going to cost him his only son, the promised offspring of Abraham. Abraham. Well, where does all that leave us?

Well, God will still continue to test us, not so that we fall, that's Satan's job, but so that we might grow and our faith might be proved genuine, that it might result in praise, honour and glory when Jesus Christ is revealed.

God is and he might even use our trust and obedience to encourage others for the good of others to see them saved.

[25 : 53] I know of some people from our church who don't have it easy at all and yet despite their ongoing trial, they continue to trust and obey God.

In fact, everyone I talk to about them, not that I go around and gossip about them, but if they come up in conversation, is encouraged because God has used their testing and their obedience to inspire us.

That's just one little example. I can't give you too many more details because they're in this room. Or take the true story of Graham and Gladys Staines. Do you remember them? Here they are on the next slide.

They, Australian missionaries working in India, helping those with leprosy as medical missionaries and then you remember 22nd of January 1999, Hindu extremists spurned Graham and his two sons alive in their car.

And the car's still there on the next slide. Needless to say that this was a huge time of testing for Gladys and her daughter Esther. And yet, she continued to trust and obey even though she didn't know why God allowed this to happen.

[27 : 15] In fact, hopefully it comes up on the next slide. she wrote, I have forgiven them in an English newspaper a few days later. And a few days later after that she decided to stay and said on the next slide, God is with me.

Who should I fear? It's extraordinary, isn't it? Now, while it was not God who killed her husband and sons, God certainly used this time of testing to prove her faith genuine.

And it did, didn't it? And to grow it. And more than that, he also used her time of testing for the good of others because church leaders have since said that as a result of her faith and actions, thousands have come to faith in the Lord Jesus.

Now, our testing may not be like Gladys' and it certainly won't be like Abraham's. But the purpose of our passage today is to remind us that when our faith is tested, when we don't understand what God is doing, when we can't see the bigger picture, remember we can still see the most important person in the picture, God.

And he has kept his promises in the past, he's already worked for our good, giving his only son. And so we can keep trusting and obeying him. And who knows, God might not only use our time of testing to prove our faith genuine and grow us, he might even use it to encourage others too.

[28 : 44] Let's pray that that might be the case, let's pray. Our gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you for this example of Abraham this morning.

Father, we pray that when we are tested, we might follow in his footsteps and trust and obey. And Father, we ask that our time of testing might be used to not only prove our faith genuine, but to grow us in the faith, and that you might even use our time of testing to encourage others.

And Father, we ask these things not for our glory, but for yours. In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen.