

Faith that is tested

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Preacher: Andrew Price

[0 : 00] Some of our kids have some tests coming up at school and it reminded me of some other children who gave some slightly amusing answers to their school tests that I saw online.

So one student was asked on a history test on the next slide, what ended in 1896 and he said 1895. Not sure that's what they're after.

On a maths test, another student was asked to find X. He said, here it is. And then there's another history test.

This one's a bit hard to see, so let me read it out to you. There's a number of questions. First one is, in which battle did Napoleon die? The student said his last one. His writing.

Where was the Declaration of Independence signed? At the bottom of the page. River Ravi flows in which state? And he wrote, liquid state.

[0 : 58] And I love how the teacher put F for the test, but an A for creativity. Now, no student I know enjoys tests.

But they are actually helpful for two reasons. First, they help you to grow in your knowledge as you study the material that you've learnt and commit it to memory. It helps you to grow in your understanding.

And secondly, it helps you to prove just how much you have learnt and do know. It can obviously prove the opposite too. But the school tests are actually designed not to make students fail, but to help them grow and prove how much they've learnt.

Well, there are times in the Christian life when our faith is also tested. When we have to choose whether we will trust God or not. Even if we can't see the bigger picture.

Even if the situation doesn't make sense to us. And while Satan will use these times to tempt us that we might fall. God actually uses these times to test us that we might grow.

[2 : 06] That our faith might be proved genuine, like the school tests. And we see this today in the story of Abraham. In fact, we'll also see that God doesn't just test Abraham to show his faith genuine.

To prove it's real and to grow it. He also tests Abraham, not just for his good, but the good of others. And that's what we'll see today in our chapter. Where God famously tests Abraham.

So at point one, you outline verse one in your Bibles. At some time 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, this is a massive test, isn't it? Can you imagine receiving that word from God? This is a huge and hard word for Abraham to accept.

[3 : 09] In fact, if it wasn't for our author telling us in verse one that it was a test, we would find it hard too. In fact, we might wonder whether this is a God we really want to follow or not. But it is a test and God knows how big it is.

Because in verse two, where he says, take your son, your only son, whom you love. He's not emphasizing that to make it harder for Abraham as though to put the boot in.

In fact, verse two is missing a word. Verse two actually starts with the word, please. And it's not often that God uses this word in the Old Testament. He says, please take your son, your only son.

That tone is gentle, you see. And so the repeated language about Isaac is not God deliberately trying to make it hard for him. That's what sinful humans do. 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 whom the father loves, who will be sacrificed years later. Hint, hint, nudge, nudge.

[4 : 17] Now, for the record, God will never actually tell us to sacrifice our children or grandchildren. And I'll tell you why later. But sometimes he will test us in situations where it doesn't feel like God knows what he's doing.

Where we can't see the bigger picture. Or his word just seems too hard to follow. Whether it's because of our society or because of our suffering or the suffering of a loved one.

I know a guy whose sister is gay and now wants to marry her girlfriend. I think they actually have married now. She thinks God's word on marriage and gender is unloving.

Even though it's possible to love people and disagree with them, it is possible to do that. And so this guy really felt and feels for her and feels this situation deeply.

I mean, it's his sister. And so will he continue to trust God's word and disagree with her or not? It's a test. For others, I know they've been suffering for some time and despite their prayers, nothing has changed.

[5 : 31] God's word says he loves them. He hears our prayers. He knows what he's doing. But it just doesn't feel like it. And so will they keep trusting God or not?

For Abraham, though, he had waited 25 years for Isaac to be born. And he loves Isaac, we're told. And what's more, just last week, God had said on the next slide that it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned or will come.

It's through Isaac that God's going to keep all his promises of making Abraham into a great nation and blessing all nations. And so to tell Abraham to sacrifice Isaac was effectively to tell Abraham to kill God's promises because they were all coming through Isaac.

Abraham could well have felt God had lost the plot and he didn't know what he was doing. And so will he trust God or not? Well, yes, he obeys.

Point two, verse three. Early the next morning, Abraham got up and loaded his donkey and he took with him two of his servants and his son, Isaac.

[6 : 45] When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. Abraham obeys, doesn't he? Gets up early the very next morning.

Unless we think that his obedience was easy for him. It's hard for us, but, you know, it's easy for those characters of the Bible. Did you notice in verse three that the author actually slows down the scene a little bit by describing each action?

So instead of saying Abraham just set off, we're told he got up, loaded his donkey, got two servants, got his son, got the wood, set out. It's kind of slowing down the pace, you see, that we might feel the weight of this with Abraham.

This was not easy for him. In fact, Abraham even seems to do things in the wrong order. He packs his donkey first and then he remembers to cut wood. Usually you kind of do it the other way around. Get everything you needed first, then pack. I mean, have you ever been so stressed or preoccupied that you just don't think straight? I remember one morning having so much on my mind that I ended up putting the cereal in the fridge and the milk in the cupboard.

[7 : 54] Have you ever done anything like that? Someone at the early morning service said, oh, that's not stress, that's old age. What? Hang on. But that's kind of the picture we get here of Abraham packing his donkey without the wood, then going back for it.

In other words, this is hard to obey and yet he still does. He sets off and reaches Mount Moriah on the third day. So verse four. 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 fire torch and the knife. 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.

[8 : 57] And the two of them went on together. And I don't know if you noticed, but Abraham's speech here, it almost looks like he's lying, doesn't it?

I mean, verse five, he told his servants that he and Isaac would go and worship and then they would both come back. But hang on, isn't he going to kill Isaac? Or verse eight, when Isaac asks about the lamb, Abraham says, well, God himself will provide the lamb, knowing full well that Isaac was

supposed to be the lamb, the burnt offering.

And so is Abraham lying here or is he just so overwhelmed? He can't think straight. Or is it that he really trusts God? You see, Abraham cannot see the bigger picture of what God is doing in verse one, testing him.

But he can see the most important person in the picture, God. And so what's more like us, Abraham also knew God had kept his promises in the past.

I mean, Isaac was living proof of that. And so as Abraham traveled for three days to Moriah, no doubt he had time to think about all this.

[10:07] No doubt he reasoned that if God had already kept his promises in the past, then he's going to keep his promises in the future. He reasoned that God will somehow keep Isaac alive so that he would keep his promises through him.

Perhaps God would provide a substitute lamb, as he says in verse eight. Or maybe God would raise Isaac from the dead, as we heard in our second reading. So do you remember on the next slide from Hebrews chapter 11?

It talks about Abraham when he was tested offering Isaac, even though it was through Isaac, your offspring will be reckoned or come. Notice the next paragraph, though.

Abraham reasoned that God was able even to raise him from the dead. And so I take it Abraham's words in verse five and verse eight are not lies, nor are they even blind faith.

Rather, the three days of thinking means his words are reasoned faith. He thought about it. He worked it out logically. In fact, the word for reason there is where we get our word for logic from.

[11:18] See, it's faith based on the evidence of God's past actions. And so his words here about God providing or both of them coming back, it shows that Abraham has genuine faith in God that he's going to keep his promises through Isaac.

What's more, his actions also show this genuine faith for he obeys God right to the end point. Almost have a look at verse nine.

And when they reached the place, God had told him about Abraham built an altar, arranged the wood, bound his son, Isaac, 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 goes almost all the way, doesn't he?

He obeys. Even though he couldn't see the bigger picture, even though it probably didn't make sense to him why God had said this, he still obeyed. In fact, even Isaac obeys.

[12:19] I mean, if Isaac is old enough to carry wood up a hill, you know, maybe nine, ten years old, then he would have been old enough to run away from his crazy old man who was trying to knife him. I mean, Abraham is old, remember.

But he doesn't. Doesn't say anything. In fact, he obeys his father and willingly went bound to the altar. And again, lest we think this was easy for Abraham to obey, our author, again, did you notice when I was reading, slows down the action, describing its action slowly.

Making us slow down to feel the weight of this. And despite how hard it was, though, Abraham still obeys right to the point of drawing the knife. And in so doing, he actually proves his faith in God is genuine, doesn't he?

God says through the angel in verse 12, he says, Now I know that you fear God. Or in the words of the New Testament on our next slide from 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? You see that his faith and his actions were working together. And his faith was made complete or proved genuine by what he did.

[13:39] I remember trying to teach this principle of how our actions demonstrate our faith to a youth group in my old church. And so I did this little experiment with a pendulum.

You know the law of pendulums? So I've just stole this from the office. It's just a mouse, but it makes a pendulum. You've got a rope, it kind of called down there, and it weighed at the end. And the rule of pendulums is it never returns to the same spot because of something to do with energy. Anyway, it's youth group, right? So I thought I'd make this a bit more exciting. I got a massive rope tied a bowling ball to the bottom of it and strung it up in the church hall roof. I wasn't the senior minister back then. I could do whatever I liked.

And I said to the kids, okay, hold the bowling ball up to your chin and let it go. And I promise you, when it comes back, it will not hit you. Do you trust me?

Do you fear me more than the bowling ball? And I wish I had a video of it because they had some funny reactions, but I found another video which illustrates the same point. So take a look and tell me which one has genuine faith.

[14 : 43] The thing that's really tough to do is do it with your eyes closed. You can feel it from the back.

This is a college student. Which one? First one, wasn't it?

Actions demonstrate faith or lack of. And do you notice the first guy who was actually the teacher, you notice how relaxed he was, your arms folded trying to look cool and all that sort of stuff?

You see, he'd done this before. And so his faith in the pendulum rule had even grown to the point where he was so comfortable he could fold his arms. And again, that's what tests do. They not only prove our faith is genuine, but they even grow us in the faith.

And it seems this is what happens to Abraham too here. And because in the past, Abraham feared for his life, so much so that he lied about his wife twice, remember? In chapter 12, chapter 20, where the word fear was used both times.

[15 : 52] But this test forced Abraham to choose whether he will fear for himself and his son again, or whether he will fear God more. And verse 12, he fears God more.

You see, this test not only proved his faith genuine, it grew his faith from chapter 12 and 20. In fact, after this chapter, we never see his faith falter again. Admittedly, he only lives for another three chapters, but he's faithful to the end.

The point is, this test has both proved his faith genuine and grown it. And again, the New Testament tells us this, what God does with tests. So on the next slide, James chapter 1 this time, James says, Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials or tests, it's the same word, of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. And let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature, you might grow and be complete, not lacking anything. Now, do get this right.

He's not saying, be joyful at the trial, you know, oh great, I've lost my job, I'm so excited. Well, you might be, but not in the trial itself, but what God's doing through the trial, growing your faith.

[17 : 09] That's the cause for joy. But why is growing our faith and proving it genuine such a big deal anyway? Well, because faith in Christ is the difference between being welcomed with praise into heaven or suffering judgment in hell.

Peter puts it like this, the next slide, 1 Peter chapter 1, he says, For a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials or tests, same word again, These have come so that your faith, which is of greater worth than gold, gold perishes even though refined by fire, so that your faith may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.

That praise, glory and honour is not just for Jesus, but also for us, where he says, well done, good and faithful servant. You see, it matters that our faith is genuine.

It's worth more than gold because it determines where we spend eternity. And so you want to know it's genuine. More than that, you want to grow in faith and persevere in faith, and God tests us to do both, just like he does here for Abraham.

In other words, God tests us for our good. And we are to respond, therefore, like Abraham did. We are to trust and obey. That our faith might be proved genuine and even grow.

[18 : 39] And on the last day, result in praise, honour and glory. Well, having passed the test, God now provides, which is point three. And we'll pick up at verse 11, where the angel speaks and intervenes.

So verse 11. The angel of the Lord called out to him 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. 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.

So Abraham called that place, the Lord will provide. And on this day, it is said, on the mountain of the Lord, it will be provided. Here, God firstly provides for Abraham.

He intervenes and provides a sacrificial substitute. Abraham reasoned back in verse 8 that God might do this, provide a lamb. And it's pretty close, isn't it? He provides a ram.

[19 : 46] Though it is interesting that God's provision here comes right at the last minute, you know, when the knife is raised. But often that's how God works, doesn't he? Why?

Well, again, because it forces us to trust him, to exercise our faith. If we just prayed and God answered it straight away, right there and then, we treat prayer like a kind of vending machine, a magical genie or something.

And we wouldn't grow in our faith. We just say the prayer and we'll get what we want. But by forcing us to wait and depend on him, he forces us to exercise our faith, our trust.

And just like exercise with most things helps us to get fitter and stronger, it's the same with our faith. And while God's provision does often come at the last minute and sometimes in ways we don't expect, it does come, though.

It does come. Just as we see here. As Hebrews again puts it, he provides grace to help us in our time of need. Well, God not only provides a substitute for Abraham and Isaac, he also then provides an oath to reassure Abraham.

[20 : 56] So have a look at verse number 15. So verse 15. The angel of the Lord called out a second time from heaven 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 surely 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.

Now, of course, God is always going to keep his promise. No matter what. But because Abraham trusted and obeyed, then God rewards him with reassurance, a guarantee.

It's as though he puts his promises in writing. I promised my kids the other day they could have Subway for dinner and one of them wanted me to put it in writing and sign it.

Cheeky, cheeky little rotter. But that's what God is doing here by swearing an oath. He's putting his promises in writing. So he doesn't just provide a substitute for Isaac.

[22 : 15] He also provides an oath for Abraham to encourage him. But God's actually doing more than just those things. You see, God's testing Abraham, not just to prove his faith genuine and to grow it, but he's also testing Abraham for us as well.

Because God will use this oath in chapter 22 to encourage Israel to take the land, to encourage us to persevere to the promised heavenly land. We don't have time to look at it, but on the next slide, I think it is.

There's a couple of references that refers back to this oath in chapter 22 and how it encourages not just Abraham, but subsequent generations. In other words, God's testing of Abraham is not just for his good, it's for the good of other people.

And it's not just the oath that's for the good of others, it's also the provision of the substitute.

Because God is teaching us that one of Abraham's promised offspring will need to be sacrificed in order for blessing to come to the nations.

That's what verse 18 is talking about. An offspring just like Isaac. And as you're reading this passage, who sounds like Isaac?

[23 : 33] Starts with G's, ends in S. Did you notice how the many ways, I mean, your son, your only son, John 3, 16, whom you love, that's what God said to Jesus at his baptism.

Who carries the wood up the hill? Isaac. Isaac. Who carries the wooden cross to his death? Jesus. There's so many ways in which Jesus, or Isaac, points to Jesus.

A big difference, of course, is that Jesus is actually sacrificed. He's both the new Isaac and the sacrificial substitute, the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.

God is testing Abraham here to teach us what he will do to bring blessing to all nations. that he will end up sending his one and only son to die for us, to pay for our sins, so that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

And so do you believe in Jesus? He's the only way to receive God's blessings. He's the only one who was sacrificed for sin. The only son.

[24 : 41] Do you believe in Jesus? For us who already do, then we need to remember what Abraham did when he was tested because we too will be tested from time to time.

We have to remember how Abraham, even though he didn't see the big picture, he saw the most important person in the picture, God. He reasoned that God had kept his promises in the past so that God would keep his promises in the future.

We've got even more. God's already worked for our good in the past by sending Jesus so we can be certain he'll work for our good in the future. And we've been prepared to trust and obey so that God might not only prove our faith genuine and grow us, but might even use us for the good of others.

There's a couple at our nine o'clock service. He's already lived longer than the doctors have given him to live, so we're not sure how much longer he has to live and his wife suffers from a disease as well.

He has leukaemia and Parkinson's. She has MS. And every time you talk to them, I mean, he often has the same joke. I'm not worried about death.

[25 : 54] I just don't want to be there when it happens. I think someone else made that joke. But whenever you talk to them, they're always trusting in God, always going, the Lord's good. In the back of my mind, I'm a minister, right?

Yep. And in the back of my mind, I'm thinking, how can you say that? Oh, the Lord's good. The Lord's good. Their faith is proved genuine, isn't it? And what's more, it's then encouraged me and encourages every other single person they talk to.

It's incredible. Or take the true story of Graham and Gladys Stain, whom some of you will have heard of. On the next slide is a photo of them, I think. So keep going. Here's a photo of them.

So Graham, Gladys, and their three kids. They are Australians who went to work in India helping those with leprosy as medical missionaries.

They were there for like 35 years, or Graham was, until the 22nd of January, 1999, when Hindu extremists burnt Graham and his two sons alive in their car, which is still there, I think, on the next slide.

[26 : 54] Now, needless to say, this was a huge time of testing for Gladys and her daughter, Esther. Huge time. And yet, days later, she released these statements in the local paper on the next slide.

I have forgiven them. Extraordinary. And then a few days later, she decided to stay. And on the next slide, she said, God is with me. Who should I fear?

Her actions and her words proved her faith genuine, didn't it? Grew her and her daughter. And as a result, church leaders have said, hundreds, if not thousands, of people have turned to Christ because of them.

God has used that test to grow them for their good and for the good of others, you see. Our testing may not be like the friends in our congregation or like Gladys, and it certainly won't be like Abraham's testing because God never tells us to sacrifice our kids or grandkids.

He actually says it against it. He did it to Abraham to point out that a sacrificial son would need to come, Jesus. But he did it also to show us how we'd respond in times of testing, that we had to trust and obey, even if we don't understand what God is doing or can't see the bigger picture.

[28 : 16] we had to do what Abraham did and reasoned that God is a good God. He's kept his promises in the past. He's given his son for us for our good already. He's going to keep working for our good in the future.

And so we're to follow in the footsteps of Abraham and indeed the footsteps of the true Isaac, Jesus. It's not always easy. Don't mishear me. It was hard for Abraham. It's going to be hard for us. But God will use it for our good and maybe even the good of others. Let's pray. Our gracious heavenly father, we do thank you for this reminder today that you test us, not so that we fall, but so that we might prove our faith genuine and even grow.

And thank you that sometimes you even use our obedience in our testing to encourage others and bring them to Christ. And so far, we do pray that you would help us to follow in the footsteps of Abraham and of his ultimate promised offspring, Jesus, who trusted and obeyed you completely. And so we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.