



Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!”

“Here I am,” he replied.

² Then God said, “Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.”

³ Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. ⁴ On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. ⁵ 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.”

⁶ Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, ⁷ Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, “Father?”

“Yes, my son?” Abraham replied.

“The fire and wood are here,” Isaac said, “but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?”

⁸ Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went on together.

⁹ When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. ¹⁰ Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, “Abraham! Abraham!”

“Here I am,” he replied.

¹² “Do not lay a hand on the boy,” he said. “Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”

¹³ Abraham looked up and there in a 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. ¹⁴ So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, “On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided.”

¹⁵ The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time ¹⁶ and said, “I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ 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, ¹⁸ and through your offspring^b all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.”

¹⁹ Then Abraham returned to his servants, and they set off together for Beersheba. And Abraham stayed in Beersheba.

If you are at least thirty years old, then you no doubt remember these [tests from the Emergency Broadcast System](#) that would suddenly interrupt your favorite TV program. Since I was a TV addict when I was a kid, I saw lots of these. And they used to freak me out and scare me. I would be watching Sesame Street or Gilligan’s island (not a rerun or on DVD, but the originals!) and these “tests” would jump onto my TV set. When I was really young I used to think something was actually going wrong, that there was an actual emergency. Then, as I got older, I used to think, “What would I do if there *was* an actual emergency? I had this feeling that sooner or later the man’s voice was going to come on and tell me this was an actual emergency. But instead, the broadcast would reassure me over and over—this is only a test.

Abraham was given a test. This is how Genesis 22 begins—*Some time later God tested Abraham*. If you know this story, you have to realize that this sounds like a huge understatement. The “test” that Abraham faced was not quite like the simple test of the Emergency Broadcast System. It was the greatest test of his life. One could argue that this was the greatest test faced by any Biblical character other than Jesus. Abraham was a man of great faith. In fact, in Galatians, Paul called him “the man of faith.” He is literally the poster boy of those who are justified by faith. But we also know that Abraham was not perfect. He showed great fear and a lack of faith when he repeatedly denied that he was Sarah’s husband and exposed her to adultery and rape.

And then, *some time later God tested Abraham*. It would not have helped to have put your arm around Abraham to calm him, saying, “Don’t worry, Abraham. This is only a test.” It was not just a test—it was THE test. It was the crescendo of his entire life. These three days of his life are the culmination of the prior thirty years of walking with the Lord. It all came down to this moment. By the time you get to this chapter, the Abraham story is almost complete. In three more chapters, Abraham’s life will be over. Will he finish strong? Will he have faith till the end? We all know how the story ends, but we usually fail to grasp its significance. This is not just about God testing Abraham, but about Abraham testing God. In order for Abraham to pass the test, he would have to put God’s faithfulness to the test. Furthermore, this story is about Jesus. We will see the many parallels to Christ in this faith story.

We see the first parallel to Christ in verse two—“*Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love*. Doesn’t this sound familiar? John 3:16 says, *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son*. Similarly, John 1:9 says, *This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him*. When Jesus was baptized in the Jordan, his Father spoke from Heaven saying, *This is my son, whom I love*. Just as Jesus was the one and only son loved by the Father, so Isaac was Abraham’s only son and loved by him. It is interesting that this is the only emotion expressed in this story. We know that this story is filled with emotion, but we are left guessing as to how each person responded. How did Abraham feel when he was first told that he must sacrifice his son? Why did he chop the wood and not let his many servants do such a task? Was it because he needed to stay active as he processed this awful command? Did he tell Sarah what he was going to do? Doubtful. We see that

Isaac did not know what was happening because he asked his father about the lamb for the burnt offering. Isaac was kept in the dark, but he must have known by the time he was bound with ropes, placed on the sacrificial altar and his father lifted the knife to slay him. There must have been a barrage of emotions tearing through Abraham's soul, yet we are not told of any of them—except this one from verse two—Abraham loved his son. Above everything else, he loved him, so how could he slaughter him?

This brings us to the second parallel between Isaac and Jesus—they were both to be an offering for sin. You do realize what was entailed in a burnt offering, right? This was no quick and simple death. The animal that was sacrificed as a burnt offering, first had its throat slit open to allow the blood to drain out. Then the animal was skinned, the internal organs were washed, it was cut up into many pieces and the entire thing was burned up on the altar. Most of us are so far removed from this bloody slaughter that we forget the details. Therefore, when God commanded Abraham to offer Isaac as a burnt offering, all of these images would have flooded his mind—slitting his son's throat, draining the blood, cutting him up and burning him on the altar. I am not saying he dwelt on these gruesome details, but they would have been unavoidable images in his mind. Burnt offerings were slaughtered as an offering for sin. Romans 8:3 says: *For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering.* Also, Romans 8:31-32. *If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?* God commanded that Abraham give up his only son, whom he loved, as a burnt offering. This foreshadowed how the Father would give his one and only son as a burnt offering to atone for sin. The Isaac offering looked forward to the Jesus offering, yet when God commanded Abraham, God had already determined that his Son would die for the sins of the world. This fact had been established and predetermined from eternity past. There never was a time when redemption that proceeded from the Father and accomplished by the son was not in the mind of the triune God.

Thirdly, both Isaac and Jesus carried the instruments of their own death. Verse six tells us that *Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac.* Isn't that an awful irony? Isaac had to carry the wood which was intended to burn his lifeless body. In the same way, Jesus was forced to carry the cross beam that was intended for his brutal execution.

The fourth parallel relates to the location of the execution. Abraham was told to go to the region of Moriah and sacrifice Isaac on one of the mountains there. Many scholars believe the region of Moriah is the area around Jerusalem and the mountain could well have been the elevated area where on which Jerusalem sits. When we think about this story and the three days journey, we tend to picture Abraham and Isaac walking up a large mountain. It is very likely that they spent their three day journey crossing the rocky desert and landed on or near the mount of Jerusalem, the very site where Jesus was crucified. This is likely though we can't say this with certainty.

The fifth parallel between Isaac and Jesus is that both sons consented to their father's will. The classic text from the mouth of Jesus is Luke 22:42, *Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.* Jesus bent his own will to the will of his Father. But what about Isaac? How do we know that he also consented? On the third day as they were approaching the place of sacrifice, verse seven records that *Isaac spoke up and said to his father*

Abraham, "Father?" "Yes, my son?" Abraham replied. "The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Where is the lamb? That's a good question, Isaac. This questions shows that Isaac was old enough to have understood the process of worship. Moreover, we know that Isaac was old enough and strong enough to carry wood up the mountain. So how old do you think he was? Abraham would probably have needed thirty or forty pounds of wood to built a fire big enough for the burnt offering. We can't say for sure, but I think that Isaac was almost certainly a teenager at this time. Also, we know that Isaac allowed his father to bind him with ropes and place him on the altar. If Isaac had been strong enough to carry the wood up a mountain, do you think he was also strong enough to have resisted his father? Would you be willingly tied up and placed on a sacrificial altar? There was an amazing, almost supernatural level of trust coming from Isaac. We can almost hear Isaac saying, "Not my will, but your will be done."

But that begs the question—exactly what was Abraham's will? Was he planning to slaughter, bleed, cut and burn his one and only son? We know that Abraham obeyed, right up until the point of raising the knife to cut Isaac's throat. But we also know that Abraham was displaying unbelievable faith at this time. We see this especially in verse five when he said to the two servants, *We will worship and then we will come back to you.* You need to catch the full significance of his words. WE will worship and then WE will come back to you. Was he lying to the servants regarding what he was about to do? Was he just in massive self-denial? Was he trying to keep Isaac in the dark up until the very last moment?

No, I don't think any of these things are true. I think that Abraham was speaking what he believed was absolutely going to take place. He and Isaac were going to the mountain to worship and both he and Isaac would return afterwards. But how could he have this clear confidence when we know that he raised his knife to slaughter his son? Simply put, he knew that Isaac could not die. Let's assume that Isaac was fifteen years old at this time. If that is the case, it means that God had been telling Abraham for the past forty years that Isaac was to be the son of promise. He was promised this twenty five years before he was born and many years after he was born. If the promise was to be reckoned through Isaac, if the nations would arise only through Isaac, especially now that Ishmael was sent away, then Abraham would have been convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that Isaac could not die.

What did Abraham think was going to happen? You will remember that Peter walked on the water because God changed the property of the water or the gravity of Peter's body, or both. Somehow the natural realm was replaced by the supernatural so that Peter could carry his 150 pounds of weight on the surface of water. In a similar way perhaps Abraham believed that the knife would pass through Isaac and not harm him. (Ex. Charles Stanley quote about God making a hole in a brick wall for your head.)

Or perhaps even more likely is what we learn from the writer of Hebrews. *By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring^b will be reckoned."* Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death (Hebrews 11:17-19). Even if he killed his son, Abraham knew that God had the power to bring him back to life. But what about

the emotional scars from knowing that your own father slit your throat open like a wild animal? How many years of counseling would you need to overcome that level of trauma? I think that Abraham trusted God for every last detail related to obeying God's command. On the one hand, God promised that Isaac would be the father of many nations and on the other hand, God commanded that Isaac be slaughtered. Abraham did not know how these two apparently contradictory facts would work together, but he did know that God knew how it would happen.

God was testing Abraham to see if he would obey, but we must understand that Abraham was also testing God to see if he would be faithful. When I say that Abraham tested God, I don't at all mean that he tested him in a sinful manner, for we are commanded in Dt 6:16, *Do not test the Lord your God*. We sinfully test the Lord when we place some kind of demand upon him. I think something as simple as not wearing a seat belt puts the Lord to the test, because our attitude is "Lord, are you going to protect me or not?" The same is true when you ride a motorcycle without a helmet. Abraham was not placing a demand on God to do something for him, he was testing what God had already told him was true. Isaac could not die, or if he did, he would be brought back to life. This whole test was God saying to Abraham, "Do you believe me? I have told you that I will build my people through Isaac. Do you believe me when I tell you that Isaac's future will not end on the mountain in Moriah? Abraham, do you believe my promise about Isaac or not?"

But if that is all that was involved, why could God not have simply asked him a few questions about his belief and be done with it? If we want to be reasonably sure that someone is telling the truth, we hook them up to a lie detector test. But God didn't need such silly instruments as a lie detector test. He knows whether you're telling the truth before you know it, so why didn't he just ask a few simple questions and know that Abraham was telling the truth? Because true belief must always be followed by true acts of obedience. Listen to how James summarized this story.

Was not our ancestor 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 by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,"^b and he was called God's friend. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone (James 2:21-24).

As you may know, Martin Luther was so opposed to the teaching of Rome and so committed to justification by faith that he did not think that the book of James should be included in the Bible. It was passages like this one that convinced Luther that James distorted justification by faith. But Luther was dead wrong on this point, because rather than *distort* it, James *completed* the teaching on justification by faith. True faith will always result in active obedience to that belief. I am going rock climbing this week at Devil's Lake State Park. What is the most important thing you need to be safe when rock climbing? You need a good rope of course, but the key is how you tie your knots. The life of everyone who ascends the cliff face is dependent upon the integrity of your knots. If someone is interested in climbing, I can ask them the question, "Do you think my knots are tied well?" They can tell me that they are, but how do I really believe them? I won't know for sure if they trust my knots until they start climbing the wall. This demonstrates two key aspects about faith.

- Faith is always active

- Faith always has an object

In rock climbing, the object of my faith is the rope and the knots, and to some degree the person holding the rope. The active nature of my faith is action of climbing the rock and trusting the rope if I slip. My faith is active and it has an object. For Abraham, the object of his faith was the trustworthiness of God and the active part of his faith was slaughtering his son.

Here is a definition of faith. Faith always results in acts of obedience that demonstrate the trustworthiness of God. Let me show you how to put this definition into practice. Do you believe that Jesus is the only way of salvation? Do you believe that people who don't believe will suffer an eternity in hell? You may answer yes to both questions, but if you never tell anyone about saving faith in Christ, then I can tell you for certain that you do not believe these things. I don't care how many times you confess them as truths. It doesn't matter how many theology exams you ace, if you don't do acts of obedience by sharing your faith, then have an absence of belief in these things. I don't mean that you have to pass out tracts every day on the street, but if you never or practically never share your faith, you don't have a faith.

This is the case for every one of our beliefs. As Christians, do we profess to believe that eternity in heaven is what really matters in life, and that accordingly, we should be denying ourselves and laying up treasures in heaven? These are core beliefs of our faith. However, if someone were to take a drastic inventory of your life—how you spend your money, how much you gave away, how you spend your time on work, entertainment and service, would there be evidence that proves your belief in an eternal perspective? Would there be much evidence at all that you are laying up treasures in heaven?

This story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac is meant to be told to every believer who has ever lived since their day. Six hundred years after it happened, Moses wrote the story down in what we call chapter 22 of Genesis. In verse 14 he testified: *And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided."* Do you see what this means? It tells us that during the four hundred years of captivity in Egypt, the Israelites continually told this story. In Moses' day they were still telling the story about Abraham's great test of faith. Fourteen hundred years later James recalled the story and made sure his readers understood that faith in God is always an active faith. True faith is an active faith. False faith is a passive faith.

But some might say, "Yes, faith must be active, but isn't right doctrine more important than good works? We all know loads of well-meaning people who do great numbers of good works, but most of them are not saved. What you believe is absolutely essential which was driven home to Karen and I again this past week. On Facebook, I found Karen's old college roommate. We had lost touch for the past few years. This woman received a master's degree in missions from Wheaton College and serves as a missionary with Operation Mobilization and Youth with a Mission for twenty years. Some of you may remember a story about her I told a few years ago. She was convinced that God told her that she was supposed to marry a certain man and the proof of this promise came to her in the form of lost change found on the streets and sidewalks. For a while, every time she went for a walk or a jog, she found coins on the street. In her mind, this was rock-solid evidence that she was destined to marry this man. At the time, I emailed her and gently asked the question, "What if you are wrong?" No, she wasn't worried—all would be well. Not only did she not marry this man, now three years later, she has completely left her faith and

is immersed in new age beliefs and has a passion for belly dancing and female empowerment. I have heard about such drastic falls from grace, but never have I personally known someone to fall so far. Where did she go wrong? Her faith was very active. She eagerly searched the ground for stray coins and was routinely rewarded for her diligence. Her faith was active, but it was based on utter silliness and superstition. She didn't really move from Christianity to New Age, she moved from *mystical* Christianity to *mystical* New Age. The common thread to which she has remained totally faithful is mysticism. Her Christianity was a veneer for her mysticism.

So we say with absolute clarity—right doctrine is essential, but even perfect doctrine is not sufficient. As I said a while back, we must have right beliefs and right actions, but right beliefs must come first. We need creeds and deeds, but always creeds before deeds.

We have one final comparison between Isaac and Jesus. In both cases, God commanded what was strictly forbidden—death, and in Isaac's case, child sacrifice. What is the thing that most tugs at our emotions when we read this story? Is it not the innocence of Isaac? Think about all of the ways he was innocent. First, he was still a child, perhaps not even past the age of accountability. Second, he was merely a pawn in the unseen test between God and Abraham. Why not risk Abraham's life, but don't put Isaac at such risk. Third, even though he seems to submit to his father's will by the end, he didn't volunteer for this. He was pulled along like an innocent lamb to the literal slaughter. This is true with every crime we hear of—the more innocent the victim, the worse the crime. If someone whacks an old woman on the head and steals her purse, it hits us differently if it were a burly thirty year old man. All murder is evil, but when a child is stolen away and his life taken from him, it hits us in the gut twice as hard.

The more innocent the victim, the worse the crime. We are meant to feel this way. This is why we should be so repulsed at the death of Jesus. Isaac had a certain level of innocence about him, but Jesus possessed a perfect innocence. Jesus was without sin. Jesus was blameless in every possible way. He was incorruptible, full of virtue and absent in guile. He was the most innocent person who has ever lived, so the crime against him was the greatest of all. The true problem of evil is not why there is suffering in the world, but why a sinless God had to take on sin for all humanity. And in the midst of all of these similarities between Isaac and Jesus we see the greatest difference—Jesus died and Isaac did not. Both fathers gave their one and only sons. Both sons went willingly and carried the instrument of their own death. But only one son died for sin because only one could.

Did you notice who stopped Abraham from slicing Isaac's neck? *But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied.*¹² *"Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son. Are you familiar with the identity of the "angel of the LORD"? The majority of them are believed to be theophanies, appearances of God in bodily form. Some instances the context shows that it is an ordinary angel, but in important stories like this one, it seems clear that the angel of the LORD is the Lord. However, most theophanies are actually Christophanies, appearances of the preincarnate Christ. Can you see the implications of this? We have already seen the great similarities between the Isaac story and Jesus. Isaac was spared from death and Jesus was not. And now we see that it is most likely Jesus who called out to Abraham and stayed his hand. Jesus spared Isaac's life because only*

Jesus could offer his life as a ransom for sin. After his son was spared, Abraham called that place *The LORD Will Provide*. If this phrase is left untranslated, it is a well known name for God—Jehovah Jireh.

Do you believe that? Do you believe that God is Jehovah Jireh, that he will provide? Notice I didn't say do you believe that everything will turn out alright. What is that anyway? What does it mean that everything will turn out OK? That I will be healthy, wealthy and fulfilled. Maybe you will and maybe you won't, but is God still Jehovah Jireh when he asks us to metaphorically sacrifice our children as a burnt offering? If your house burns down, is he still Jehovah Jireh?

Rich Maurer
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^b Or *seed*

^b Greek *seed*

^b Gen. 15:6