



Abraham's Greatest Test

The Sacrifice of Isaac

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When we think of faithful men in the Bible, we will see Abraham at the forefront. This great man of faith endured a lifetime of trials. Few men ever face such an array of challenges as those of Abraham. He is called to leave his homeland in Ur and go to a place that he has never seen and live in tents of unfriendly lands (Gen. 12:1-2). Then he must father a child when nature says that he is too old. God promised a son that would be his heir and the seed of a great nation, but many years passed. Well beyond the age to father a child, this was more than a promise; it was a test and Abraham passed it (Gen. 15:1-6). Believing God for a child at his age is a gold standard for faith. We will later see Abraham as Paul's shining example in his great treatise on the doctrine of justification by faith (Rom. 4:1-3; 5:1). The name Abraham becomes synonymous with faith.

The close of one chapter in a life typically opens a new one full of opportunity and promise. But Abraham's life moves from one challenge to another. The words "after these things" (Gen. 22:1) force our minds backward to former scenes of trial, hardship and challenge. Can Abraham begin to believe that the winds are calming over him? We are soon to see that is not the case. Rather, he will face an experience more painful than anything before. This next test elevates Abraham above all others.

Here Abraham's greatest test is introduced. "Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham" (Gen. 22:1). Some translations use the word "tempt," which could imply that God could lead one to evil. This term is misleading, seeing that the epistle of James teaches that "God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone" (James 1:13).

How do we know that it was a test? The Hebrew writer verifies this with a direct statement of inspiration: "By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac..." (Heb. 11:17). The word for "tested" (piradzo) means that it is an ongoing process. The verb phrase, "offered up" (prosphero) tells us that the act was already consummated in the mind of Abraham. According to A.T. Robertson's Word Pictures in the N.T., that same word is used 16 times in Hebrews. God provides Abraham's heart an opportunity to manifest supreme trust. This is a great treasure.

While it is not clear how God communicated, Abraham knew the source. Abraham had

such a walk with God that he was well acquainted with the voice of the Almighty. There was no “flame of fire” or emphatic call such as “Moses, Moses” (Ex. 3:2, 4). God simply spoke his name as a familiar thing “and said unto him, Abraham; and he said, Behold, Here I am” (Gen. 22:1b). Abraham’s response needs no explanation and one could hardly wonder but that God’s impulses find faithful responses. God spoke and Abraham obeyed as the compliant child.

Now we hear the specifics of God’s test of Abraham in these words, “Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering” (Gen. 22:2). Can you think of a bigger test for a mortal man? What is the greater love?

I cannot fathom being asked to make such a sacrifice. My wife and I only have one child, but the number does not matter. We may lack all the experiences of Abraham, but we know the love of our child. Many would know someone that has lost a child to death. I have heard it often said that it was the hardest thing they ever did. Abraham was asked to offer his son as a conscious decision of his own will. He put the love of his child aside to obey the will of God.

Isaac was more than just an only child. He was the son of promise. He was the only child of his kind. At their age, 100 and 99, Abraham and Sarah were convinced that they were too old to have children and would go without a child for their posterity. Genesis 15 details the promise of seed to Abraham and his subsequent faith (Gen. 15:5-6). The promised seed was for the promise of “a great nation” and the covenant with Abraham’s seed (Gen. 17:15-22; 18:9-22). His name was to be called Isaac. To Sarah, the idea of a child was so foreign that she laughed at it (Gen. 18:11-12).

God’s request to Abraham was no symbolic act. It was not a lamb, but a child. The father was to offer Isaac as a “burnt offering.” This offering was a sacrifice like all the other animal sacrifices. Both Abraham and Isaac understood this. Abraham split the wood, laid it on Isaac and took both the fire and the knife, at which point Isaac notices the obvious exception: “Behold the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” (vs. 3-7) Did Isaac understand that there was going to be an actual animal sacrifice? He surely understood the one thing that was missing, the lamb. Then Abraham replied, “My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering...” (7-8). This is a shadow of another lamb to be offered on Calvary.

Abraham’s heart was no doubt breaking and stretched to its limit, but his mind was fixed on God. It is evident that trust is not always easy, but the faithful father presses forward to complete the offering. The scene is intense and tugs at all the emotions. This father is about to sacrifice his only son upon an altar. “And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son” (v. 10). The phrase “to slay” is *shachat* in Hebrew, meaning “to slaughter, slay, kill or massacre” according to Strong’s Exhaustive

Concordance of the Bible. Abraham is in the process of killing his son!

God calls again, this time to intervene in the trial. "Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him..." (v. 12). Abraham had already committed the act (Heb. 11:17). Though God's interventions spared Isaac, Abraham is credited with committing the act.

What does this tell us about Abraham? He fully trusted God, holding back nothing. Unflinching, Abraham fully complied with God's request. It is easier to trust for things that we want. It is something else when it comes to trusting Jehovah for something that He wants. Abraham didn't waver, quibble, or attempt to short God. He simply did what God asked of him. He knew what the knife would do. Of this, God reassured Abraham, "...for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me" (v. 12). We also now know what God knew about this remarkable man of faith. At God's word, Abraham released his hold on everything. Think about that.

What can we take away from Abraham? First, we are told that "whatever things were written before were written for our learning..." (Rom. 15:4). Abraham is our greatest example of faithful obedience and complete trust in God. True reliance is a product of faith. Abraham helps us to see what it looks like in action. It is bold and extraordinary. We stand in awe of our "father Abraham" (Rom. 4:12). His faithfulness is our teacher.

Second, there are some things we can do to increase our faith to face our tests. First, we can understand that everyone has trials (Jas. 1:1-3; 2 Cor. 12:1-10). If men like Abraham and Paul faced them, why would God withhold them from me? We can also allow faith-building experiences to work for us. Abraham's faith was not miraculous; it came through growth, trial upon trial. Remember the adage that the horse which jerks against the bits only gets a sore mouth. Relax and let God perfect His building work in you.

Remember that God has put into each one of us the ability to follow and obey Him. Abraham was not a superman. He was a man, regular like the rest of us. His example is genuine, as is his faith. God shows us this man so that we can know how faith works. Abraham serves as a blueprint of faith.

Finally, permit God's Word to show us the plan and then endorse it with wholeheartedness. Christ is just such a pattern to follow (1 Pet. 2:21). Pray for greater insights like Moses did when he prayed, "I pray, if I have found grace in Your sight, show me now Your way, that I may know you..." (Ex. 33:13). Greater faith will help us to say, as Abraham did, "God will provide..."

There is little wonder that this Abrahamic faith has God's stamp of approval. Tests, large and small, will come to us. Just as Abraham trusted God, this kind of faith will also suffice for you, child of God.