

Genesis 22 — Tests

March 13, 2016

Welcome to CrossWinds. As a church we are studying through the book of Genesis. This morning, we are in Genesis 22. Take out your outlines and turn to Genesis 22 in your Bible or smartphone.

For the last few weeks we followed the story of Abraham. The book of Hebrews calls him a hero of the faith. That doesn't mean he was bulletproof. As we saw, he didn't live a perfect life. Twice he pawned his wife off as his sister. She almost slept with another man because of Abraham's cowardice and lack of trust in God. Both times God came to her rescue. His personal sexual purity wasn't the best. He slept with the maid and even conceived a child through her. He definitely was not a perfect guy. He was a guy whose faith grew and matured over time, just like each of us. Over time, he grew away from sin and close to his God.

Today, we are in Genesis 22. This is a big chapter in Abraham's life. This is one of the times he follows Christ the right way. It is such an important chapter we will take two weeks to study it because there is so much in it. This week, we will focus in on the testing of Abraham's faith and what we can learn about times God tests our faith. Next week, on Palm Sunday, we will look at this chapter and see how the near sacrifice of Isaac's life, that was only averted by a substitute God provided, foreshadows what Jesus did 2,000 years later on the cross.

Before we just into the chapter, let me set the scene.

Last week, in Genesis 21, we left off with Abraham living in the region of Gerar by the Philistines. He just moved into town from the region of Mamre. Life has rough seasons and good seasons. Life in Gerar was one of the good seasons for Abraham. He had a peace treaty with Abimelech — the ruler of the Philistines. Abraham had no enemies. There were no wars to fight. Business went well. Life was comfortable. The best part was he was enjoying the son he waited 25 years for God to deliver, Isaac. Isaac was the center of Abraham's universe. Every day Isaac did chores with dad. He couldn't wait to spend time with his father and his father couldn't wait to spend time with him. They rode the Polaris side-by-side around the ranch while doing chores. They laughed together and poked fun at each other. Isaac loved being with his dad. Abraham loved being with his boy. There was no smartphone, Youtube or Snapchat to distract from their relationship. Abraham and Isaac were not just father and son, they were the closest of friends.

This idyllic life continued for a long time. It is between 15 to 30 years from the close of chapter 21, during which Isaac was having his 3-year-old birthday party to the beginning of chapter 22, when he was a grown man. Scholars were divided on Isaac's age. I think Isaac he was around 25. That is my guess.

When I think of Abraham and Isaac, I think of my sons. There is a special bond between a father and his sons. I prayed for my boys before they were born and I continue to pray over each of my boys almost every day; I have since they were born. When Cindy and I married, I prayed for two boys born two years

apart. God answered that prayer and one was born February 1 and the second was born two years later on February 19. I love spending time with my boys.

I was a wrestler, so wrestling became a big part of our father/son time together. Before we moved to Iowa, two nights a week I drove my boys to wrestling practice and helped coach. On Saturdays I drove them around the state of Michigan to wrestling meets. They did well. We had fun. I played the role of father, coach and the guy who paid for dinner after the match. Those were great days.

When I think of the relationship between Abraham and Isaac, I think of the relationship between me and my sons. I would do anything for my boys. I gladly sacrifice for them. When they are in trouble, I am there. When they need a cheerleader after a bad wrestling match, I am by their sides.

One time Daniel hit his head on a lunchroom floor during wrestling practice in Michigan. He ended up with a big goose-egg on his head. He was light-headed and dizzy. Other parents were worried. They encouraged me to take him to the hospital. Fearing brain damage, I threw him, Cindy and the rest of my family in my big truck and drove as fast as I could in the pouring rain to the hospital. I burst into the emergency room with my son and told everyone to get to the back of the line. My boy needed help. "I think he has brain damage." After the doctor looked at him it turned out all he needed to do was breathe into a paper bag. The only thing wrong with him was he was hyperventilating. At the time, I didn't know it. I am his father. I would do anything for him and would have gotten him to the hospital and the doctor no matter what it took.

Sometimes at night I look at my boys asleep in their beds and can't believe I am a father of two sons I love so much. Do any other fathers have that same kind of I-will-die-for-you love for your sons? That was the love between Abraham and Isaac. Abraham would have died for Isaac in an instant. For Isaac, his dad was not just his father. He was his hero. You need to feel those emotions because if we don't engage those feelings, Genesis 22 won't make sense.

After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." Genesis 22:1-2 (ESV)

Hold the phone. What just happened? God told Abraham to take his son, his only son, the son he loved, the son he would have died for, the son he shed a tear of joy over every morning, and to murder him on a mountain in the region of Moriah.

Thankfully, we know this was a test. Moses, told us it was a test. Abraham didn't know it was a test. All he knew was God clearly spoke in an audible voice. There was no misunderstanding what God told him to do. He was to take the son he loved, the son that was the apple of his eye, the son he waited 100 years to have and go to a mountain in the region of Moriah and kill him in an act of cold-blooded murder.

We will cover more of this next week but there are many parallels between the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22 and the death of Jesus. One of the parallels is this mountain. If you turn to 2 Chronicles 3:1 you discover that it was on Mount Moriah that Solomon was told to build the temple. On this same mountain the

blood of countless animals were shed through the Old Testament sacrificial system as those animals died as a substitute for others' sin. This is also the mountain where Jesus died in our places for our sins. The sacrifice of the Isaac, the long-awaited promised son in the Old Testament, parallels the sacrifice of Jesus, the long-awaited promised son in the New Testament.

Can you imagine what God asked Abraham to do? Most of us read this and do not let it emotionally connect. Sacrificing his son as a burnt offering meant Abraham would slit Isaac's throat with a knife. Then he would then dismember his son's body by cutting off his limbs and gutting the organs of his own child. Next Abraham would take the chunks of flesh and burn Isaac's body to ashes on the altar as a burnt offering. This is mind-numbing. This is like a scene from a XXX horror film.

As a father, I cannot imagine the horror of burying my own children. It is even harder to think of preaching the funeral sermon for my own children . I think of what the family of Austin Roberts went through this winter when their son died on the wrestling mat. I can't imagine the agony they went through when they lost their child. Imagine what it would feel like if you were responsible for the death of your only son. Imagine it wasn't accidental death but it was through your own act of premeditated murder that your son died. That is what Abraham was facing. I can't imagine anything more horrifying than God telling him to murder the son he loved more than life itself.

We know this was a test. Abraham didn't. Would you be able to murder your son if God told you to kill him? This is not as far fetched as it may seem. At this time the Canaanites sacrificed their children in worship.

So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you." Genesis 22:3–5 (ESV)

What shocks me is Abraham responded immediately. He didn't sleep in. He didn't argue with God. He didn't ask for reconfirmation. He just obeyed. The Bible is silent about what he was thinking. The Bible doesn't tell us what he was feeling. I am sure he wasn't thrilled. I am confident he was in agony. If God told him to do something, and there was no lack of clarity because he heard God's voice, he set about obeying God's word, even if it didn't make sense. Abraham realized his job was not to figure out what God was going to do. His job was to obey what God told him to do. He learned from almost losing his wife to Pharaoh in Genesis 12 when he couldn't figure out how God would take care of him in the famine. He learned this in Genesis 20 when he almost lost his wife again but this time to Abimelech, the ruler of the Philistines, because he acted in fear instead of trusting God.

He was going to trust and obey God's words this time even if he couldn't figure out God's plans for the future.

Abraham took two servants, saddled his donkey and cut the wood for the burnt offering. Apparently the place they were going was desolate and they needed to pack in the wood. It was a 50-mile trip. It took three days. For Isaac,

who loved his father, this trip would be like three days of a father/son camping trip. It was three days of a father and his son riding side-by-side on the trail talking about life. Isaac would be talking about his future. He would be talking about girls and marriage. Everything looked like a green light in front of him. His future was bright. Abraham knew he was actually marching to his death.

I haven't taken many father/son trips with my boys, but on the occasions I have, they were worth every moment. In 1994 I took my boys to a father/son wrestling camp in Wisconsin. Not only did my boys spend time wrestling but we did father/son campouts, ate in the dining hall together, fished together, ran together and played team games together. It was a great trip. I can still remember the ride home. As I drove my boys were in the extended cab section of my old F150. They reached from behind the seat and put their arms around me and told me they loved me. Then they slumped into the backseat and fell asleep. Completely without warning my emotions welled up and I began balling. I couldn't fight back my tears. They were not tears of sadness but tears of joy. I was bursting with thankfulness because God gave me two great sons and I loved being with them. That father/son guy time together was great. If you are a father with sons, make sure you make that time.

It was one of those kind of road trips for Abraham and Isaac. It was guy time together. Isaac was loving the time with dad but Abraham's heart was breaking because he had to kill him. Can you imagine the pain? Who do you love more, your God or your son?

I love how Abraham learned to approach life. Obey God's word, even if it doesn't make sense or look like it will work out in the end. Let God take care of the results. Our job is obedience. I love what he said to his servants.

I and the boy will go over there and worship and come back to you. Abraham didn't know how this would work out because he was going to kill his son but he knew it is God's job to make it work out.

God promised Abraham that it would be through Isaac his descendants would come. How could God want him to kill Isaac yet still have his descendants through Isaac? Abraham didn't know. He just knew it was his job is to obey God's word, not to worry about the results from doing it. God takes care of the results.

This is a lesson many of us are struggling to learn. I see this all the time. God's word tells us to do something, like when he says in Hebrews 13:4 to keep the marriage bed pure and promises God will judge the sexually immoral. Many people come to Christ and they are already living together. They don't want to move apart because they can't figure out how to do it financially. Your job is to obey God's word. God's job is to make sure it works out for you to obey him.

God talks about honesty but all of our friends are cheating to get higher grades. Mark 10:19 tells us God doesn't want us to cheat. If we don't join in cheating, we will barely pass the class. Obey God and trust him with the results, even when you don't see how it will work out.

If you deal honestly in business, maybe you will lose money. God says we are to be true in all we do and to obey him and trust the results into his hands, even when it seems to make no sense.

I implore you, obey God's words even if you don't see how they will work out.

And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together. Genesis 22:6-8 (ESV)

This is amazing. They were bringing enough wood to burn a body to ashes. That is a lot of wood to carry up a mountain. This is why I think Isaac was in his late 20s or early 30s. Isaac was a stud. He carried a massive pack of wood on his back up a mountain that was probably too steep for animals to climb. About 130-year-old Abraham carried a knife and some hot coals in a pouch. Abraham was waddling up the mountain, and Isaac was hefting huge amounts of weight.

As they were climbing, Isaac asked the obvious question. "Where is the lamb for the sacrifice? We are bringing all this wood up the mountain, the knife and the fire but we need something to kill. We need something to butcher." All Abraham could say in that moment is that God would provide. Abraham believed that God needed to provide a substitute for the death of his son. As we know, thousands of years later, that is what God did. God provided the substitute of his own son to die not just in Isaac's place but in our places for our sins.

The only way for Isaac to not die was for there to be a substitute to die in his place. The only one who could provide that substitute would be God.

When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place, "The Lord will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided." Genesis 22:9–14 (ESV)

Abraham built the altar, laid the wood on the altar and bound his son on the altar. Remember that Isaac was a stud. He was an NFL football player. He carried all the wood single-handedly on his back up the mountain. Isaac was in his 20s and could play pro-sports. Abraham was 130 years old and wobbly. The only way that Abraham could have bound Isaac and put him on the altar was if Isaac let his father do it. Isaac could have resisted his father. Isaac could have run from his father. Isaac could have defended himself. He didn't. Isaac was submissive to his father's will even when he didn't understand his father's will. Just as Abraham was submissive to his heavenly father's will even when he didn't understand it.

In the same way Jesus was submissive to his father to will to lay down his life and die on that very same mountain. Even in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus said, "Father, please remove this cup from me but not my will but yours be done."

What an amazing example for sons to follow today. Isaac submitted to his father's will even when he didn't understand it. In the same way sons today should honor their fathers by submitting to their fathers' will even if they don't understand it. Maybe that deals with who you spend time with. Maybe that is who you should or shouldn't date. Maybe that pertains to where your father doesn't want you to go. Maybe that means going to church when you don't want to because your father says you need to be there. Maybe that means reading your Bible when you don't feel like it because your father asked you to. Isaac willingly submitted to his father even though he didn't understand what his father was doing. In the same way, Jesus submitted to his father's will even when he was asking if there could be another way.

Can you picture these next moments? I picture Isaac laying on the wood, hands and feet bound and his body trembling in fear with tears streaming down his face as he looked into his father's with terror, disbelief and trust. I don't think Abraham was stoic either. I picture him looking at his son with sobs punctuating his breath as big tears fell down his leathered cheeks running over his beard and splattered on the trembling chest of his son. Abraham was hoping and praying he could slit his son's throat quick with one shot. Get it over with as quickly as possible, as painlessly as possible. He didn't know why God was telling him to do this. He didn't know how God would rescue Isaac. He saw no substitute. As Hebrews says, the only option Abraham could see was God raising Isaac from the dead. As Abraham took the knife and raised it in the air he heard God call his name not once but twice. "Abraham! Abraham! Stop!"

“Now I know you fear me. You didn’t hold back your son, your only son from me.” Abraham passed the test. He was willing to obey God’s word no matter what the cost. Abraham loved his son more than life itself, but he loved and trusted God even more. Now Abraham knew his heart and Isaac knew it as well. God did indeed provide a substitute for Isaac on that mountain.

Abraham looked behind him and heard the rustling of a ram caught in a bush. God provided a substitute. At the last minute, God came to the rescue. Can you picture Abraham cutting his son free and the two of them running together to grab the ram, slaughter it and burn it on the altar? As the ram went up in smoke, Abraham and Isaac were on their knees holding each other sobbing uncontrollably because God came to the rescue and provided a substitute.

Abraham called the name of that place “the Lord will provide.” To this day it is said, “On the mountain of the Lord, God will provide a substitute.” Remember this was written thousands of years before Jesus. What did John the Baptist say when Jesus showed up 2,000 years later?

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” John 1:29 (ESV)

Jesus came as the substitute to die in our place for our sin.

“The Lord will provide” in Hebrew is translated to English as Jehovah-Jireh. Some of you long-time Christians will remember the song Jehovah-Jireh, my provider, his grace is sufficient for me. This is where it comes from. God provided the ram as a substitute for Isaac so he didn’t have to die. On this same mountain God provided his own son as a substitute so we don’t have to die.

This is the cornerstone of what it means to be a Christian. It is called penal substitutionary atonement. Penal means punishment. Substitutionary means substitute. Atonements means to restore a relationship to the state of at-one-ment.

Jesus is the lamb of God who took our punishment and died in our places to bring us back into a relationship with God.

Some of you are still uneasy with this horror movie of a text. How could a good God think up such a sick test as telling Abraham to kill his son? There are two things you need to know. First, it was only a test. God never intended for Abraham to carry it through. Second, the death of Isaac which was averted by a substitute was meant to foreshadow Jesus so we would see it thousands of years later when Jesus died as our substitute.

Before we leave this story, I promised you we would take look at this story through the lens of testing.

Why does God test us?

If you aren't a Christian, you don't need to worry about God testing your faith. God only tests Christians. Hebrews 12:8 tells us that if you are not tested by God then it means you are not a child of God. Of course, if you are never tested by God that means you will not like eternity. God loves us too much to not test us. Here are three reasons why God tests our faith.

1. God tests our faith to build our patience and mature our character.

As we watched Abraham's life, he faced a number of faith tests. Sometimes he was strong — like when he trusted God as he divided the land

with Lot. Sometimes he failed the faith test — like when he gave his wife away to Pharaoh. God will put us through trials and tests of faith to mature us and grow us. If you are a Christian, I guarantee your life will be hard and you will face faith tests, like Abraham did. God brings them to mature and grow our character so we learn to trust him more.

It is like athletic conditioning. Unless you work hard in the practice room preparing for the match, you will not do well in the match.

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. James 1:2–4 (ESV)

If you want spiritual maturity, tests and trials are the only way to get it.

God loves us too much to not let us face trials.

2. God tests our faith to purify us from sin like metal in a furnace.

Most of us do not like trials. We do not like temptations. We do not like hard times. Show me a spiritually mature man or woman that lives a holy life and I will show you someone who has been purified through suffering.

When we dabble in sin we know it when God kicks our feet out from under us through suffering. In those times we need to urgently repent and pray. You will find that some of your closest times with God are in the wake of your sin when you are in deep heart-felt repentance. God uses trials to purify us and root out sin in our lives. It is always better to face suffering and be purified of sin than to continue in ease and comfort and walk in sin. To that end suffering is part of God's mercy to save our souls.

For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried. Psalm 66:10 (ESV)

Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction. Isaiah 48:10 (ESV)

Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word. Psalm 119:67 (ESV)

The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold, and the Lord tests hearts. Proverbs 17:3 (ESV)

If you are facing a test or a trial that you know deep in your heart was sent by God to break you from sin, repent of that sin and thank God for your suffering. God loves us too much to let sin destroy our lives.

3. God tests our faith to pass it on to those we love.

As I think about Genesis 22, I think this is a big reason God tested Abraham. I don't think Abraham was just tested for his benefit but he was tested for Isaac's benefit. Isaac grew up in the comfort of Gerar. Isaac grew up hearing from his dad about God's great works and God's rescues. Isaac grew up with great Bible teaching from his father and mother but he never saw his father's love for God tested and demonstrated.

Before Genesis 22 Isaac never saw his father obey God's word when it cost him. When Isaac saw Abraham obey God's word, even when it didn't make sense, and go to the edge of sacrificing him, that created a memory Isaac never forgot, and he leaned on it for the rest of his life. As far as we know, Isaac had never heard the voice of God until he heard God calling his father's name twice to save Isaac's life. As far as we know, Isaac never saw God miraculously provide a substitute until God provided the ram caught in the thicket by its horns.

God knew Abraham needed to pass his faith to his son. His son needed to see his father's trust in God through practice, not theory. Abraham and Isaac needed to have those experiences together.

Parents, our job is to pass our faith to our children. Part of that is teaching your kids the Bible. It is filling their head with information. To that end you take them to church, AWANA and youth group.

We need to understand that part of passing the faith of a mother or father to a son or a daughter is God putting parents in trials so our children can see how we handle the crises. Our children need to see us choosing to obey God in faith when it seems to make no sense so they can remember the stories of how God provided. This way when God puts them in a crisis, they will remember the experience their parents went through and how they trusted in God in a trial and how God came to the rescue. They will do the same. This is all part of passing the faith of a father to a son and the faith of a mother to a daughter.

God puts us in trials where he tests our faith not always for our benefit but for the benefit of our children who are watching us live by faith in the midst of the crisis.

If we curse God in a trial or disobey God in a trial, our children are watching and learning. If we hang on to God in a trial and obey God's word even when it is incredibly hard, our children are watching. They are learning. They will follow in our footsteps.

The only thing worse than seeing your son die with Christ is seeing a son live without him. Some of you are facing tough trials as parents. Maybe the

reason God has you in those trials is for you to show your children what it looks like to hold on to Jesus in a crisis so they will learn to do the same.

Remember the only thing worse than seeing your son die is seeing your son live without faith. It is only as we face trials that our children learn that our faith is real. It isn't a facade that crumbles in adversity. It is usually when our children watch us face those crises of faith that authentic faith is passed on in their lives.



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