

# God Tests Our Faith to Prove He Provides

## *The Life of Abraham: A Study in Genesis 12-22 Sermon 7*

Genesis 22

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C. S. Lewis married late in life, and his happiness was short-lived. Joy Davidman, his bride, died of cancer just four years later. Lewis processes his loss, and how it affected his relationship with God, with striking honesty in *A Grief Observed*. There were instances, Lewis explains, when it seemed their prayers were answered, and God was healing her cancer. But, only for it to return:

“Time after time, when He seemed most gracious, He was really preparing the next torture.”<sup>1</sup>

This long-awaited gift of marital bliss was given only to be snatched away, he groans,

“Oh God, God, why did you take such trouble to force this creature out of its shell if it is now doomed to crawl back—to be sucked back—into it”.<sup>2</sup>

It is perhaps an experience we’d rather not talk about—this fact, that sometimes it seems as though God opens our hearts only to hurt them. Sometimes God’s way with us in the present seems opposed to His formerly declared purposes to help us and love us.

Abraham must have felt something of this when, in Genesis 22, God asked him to sacrifice his son. After all those painful years of waiting and hoping, Isaac had finally been given. The miracle had arrived. Sarah and Abraham, in their old age, had tenderly, vulnerably, kept their hearts open to this hope. And only for this terrifying command to come—seemingly out of nowhere.

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” (22:1-2).

It's one of the most memorable and challenging events in the Bible. And it's the last major happening between Abraham and God. In Genesis 23, Sarah will be laid to rest; and soon after, in Genesis 25, Abraham will be buried alongside her. But to culminate a life of faith, the old man faces his greatest test.

And it is a test. Moses—the narrator—wants the reader to know this at the outset: “God tested Abraham.”

This is crucial to note, for it sets boundaries around the tension in the event. It lets the reader know that God is not planning on ending Isaac's life. There will be no child sacrifice in this story. And of course, a later Israelite would know from God's own Word that God abhors and forbids child sacrifice (Jeremiah 7:31).<sup>3</sup> Which was, tragically, practiced by the Canaanites Abraham lived amongst.

There is also the fact that Abraham, somehow, seems convinced he will come back with Isaac. He tells the accompanying servants in verse 5,

Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you (22:5).

The two will return. The writer of Hebrews tells us that Abraham's faith ran so deep at this point, that he was confident God could raise a sacrificed Isaac from the dead:

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, confident that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back (Hebrews 11:17-19).

There are several angles from which we must see that this story is *not* about child sacrifice; there is something deeper going on. But this does not relieve the tension. God is still testing Abraham in an unimaginable and incomprehensible way. And Abraham obeys. He comes to the point of binding Isaac, grasping the knife and raising his hand. And only then does the angel of the Lord call out from heaven:

“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.” (22:9-12).

For so many this passage raises impossible questions—questions of ethics, fairness, and God’s goodness. As I’ve pondered it this week, I’ve found that a passage like this puts me in a place somewhat like Job, who, at the end of his own irrational and mystifying suffering, finds his questions met by the grandeur of God:

The LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind and said, “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me. Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding” (Job 38:1-4).

A passage like Genesis 22 reminds us that God is not a flickering candle we control. God is “an all-consuming fire” we bow before (see Hebrews 12:29).<sup>4</sup> And with humility and reverence, we must ask what He has to teach us through this—the greatest of trials the man of faith faced, and what this test reveals to us about the God of Abraham.

There are two themes that arise in our passage: (1) God tests faith. And, as we’ll see, (2) God provides for us when He tests us. You could state the theme of the passage like this: **God tests His people to prove that He provides.**

## I. God Tests Faith

After these things, God *tested* Abraham (22:1).

This is the first time the theme of testing appears in the Bible but not the last. In various ways, and at various times, God tests His people.<sup>5</sup> The Psalmist even cries out for it: “Prove me, O LORD, and try me; test my heart and my mind” (Psalm 26:2).

Being tested by God is not like taking a written exam to see how much you know. It’s more like a piece of metal being put into fire. In the heat, the quality of the metal is revealed; but also, through the heat, the metal is purified and reshaped. God’s testing never aims to destroy but to refine and refashion.<sup>6</sup>

*What is this testing like?*

## A few observations about testing

1. Notice that God is testing Abraham, who is already a man of faith. **God tests *His* people.** God deals with His people differently than He deals with those who don't know or follow Him. With a non-believer, God may be at work to convict them, but He is not at work to test them. God's testing is part of His special care and total commitment to His people. And this means that we should not be surprised that the path of obedience to God is met with different headwinds than the path of disobedience.
2. **Consider that God tests us again and again.** Some readers think Abraham underwent ten tests in all, with Genesis 22 being the culminating tenth.<sup>7</sup> However we tally the events of his life, it's clear that God tests Abraham more than once and in more than one way.
3. **Notice that this testing happens through real life experience.** It's not enough for Abraham to verbally agree to sacrifice Isaac; he must *do it*. Remember Peter, how quick he was to verbally attest that his faith would not fail His Lord: "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will." (Matthew 26:33). But in the fire of experience, Peter does fall away. God tests by real experience.
4. **God's testing reaches to what we love most.** Abraham is asked to put his whole heart on the altar through Isaac: "Your son, your only son, whom you love—*Isaac!*" (22:2). "For the believing community," one author writes, "Isaac [may be] a metaphor for anyone or anything that is particularly valuable to those being tested."<sup>8</sup>
5. **Lastly, and most difficult, God's testing may involve Godforsakeness.** Isaac represents more than a natural son. He represents more than just the height of earthly gifts. Isaac represents the future: through him, the nations come; through him the world receives blessing. The disappearance of Isaac is the disappearance of the whole promise.

And Isaac represents God's faithfulness, God's goodness, to Abraham. God's stated plan was to give Isaac. Now God's command is to give Isaac back to God—to lose him.

One commentator notes that this experience of Abraham may have rung true with many of God's people: "[The Lord at times] seems to contradict himself, he appears to want to remove the salvation begun by himself from history. But in this way Yahweh tests faith and obedience."<sup>9</sup>

Abraham must walk a path into Godforsakeness. It seems God has led Abraham to Golgotha.

*Why does God do this?* Hasn't Abraham been through enough already? Hasn't God's plan progressed enough that Abraham can be left in peace? Isaac is born, and God will bring His plans through Isaac now. Why does Abraham need to continue to face testing? And why does this test have to be so hard?

## Some reasons God tests us

1. Certainly, **God forms us through testing**. Many of us only really learn to pray, or really learn to live upon God's Word when we are in a severe trial or test.
2. **Testing also reveals**—it reveals how deep our faith runs, and it reveals who we really are. In a church community, it is so very encouraging to be among saints who have been severely tested, and who have been found to be faithful. Charles Spurgeon explains of Abraham passing through this test:

Do you not think, also, that it did Abraham great good in assuring his own heart, and enabling him to know, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that he really did fear and love God?... Would it not be worthwhile to pass through some tremendous trouble, to get that settled once and for all? I do think that the Lord gives some of his people full-assuring tribulations, so that when once these are past, all doubting and fearing are at an end.<sup>10</sup>

There are some people in our church family who, when it comes to enduring trials and tests, have, figuratively speaking, killed a lion. No, you're not proud; but you are confident. You know how to live upon God, even in the midst of seeming Godforsakeness. We need your tested-and-tried faith.

God tests us to form us and to reveal to us who we really are. But there is something deeper going on in this passage. God tests us not only to reveal who we are; God tests us to reveal who He is: *that He is the God who provides!* And here we come to the second major theme of the passage: the God who tests, tests to prove He can provide.

## II. God Provides for His People's Need

Three times in our passage the notion of God's provision is stated: After Isaac asks his father, "where is the lamb for the burnt offering," Abraham replies in verse 8:

Abraham said, "God will **provide** for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son" (22:8).

Next, after the angel stops Abraham, and Abraham looks up and sees a ram caught in a thicket (which he sacrifices instead of Isaac), we read in verse 14:

So Abraham called the name of that place, "The LORD will **provide**" (22:14).

And then Moses adds,

"as it is said to this day, 'On the mount of the Lord it shall be **provided**'" (22:4b).

This, now, becomes the resounding point of this passage:

### **The Lord tests our faith to prove to our hearts that He provides.**

But notice what God does provide. This passage foreshadows the most significant event in the Bible, and in doing so bears witness to just how far God will go to provide for His people.

For an Israelite hearing this story later, the location of Moriah would immediately signal one thing: *the Jerusalem temple*. In 2 Chronicles 3:1, we read that:

Solomon began to build the house of the LORD in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, (2 Chronicles 3:1).<sup>11</sup>

Abraham is not going up to just any altar with Isaac; Abraham is ascending the mountain of the Lord to the very place where Israel will later make sacrifices to God in worship. And, where God's own Son will be killed.

*And how might an Israelite have thought of Isaac in this passage? They would have seen themselves in Isaac. Quite literally, they were in Isaac. Isaac represents the people of God, summed up in one man.*<sup>12</sup> And then there is Isaac carrying the wood on his back:

And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son (22:6).

One Jewish commentator, writing perhaps around the time of Jesus' life said: "Isaac with the wood was like a condemned man carrying his cross."<sup>13</sup> We can hardly not picture Jesus, who,

went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called The Place of a Skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha (John 19:17).

## **The Substitutionary Lamb**

And there is Abraham's statement in verse 8, so prophetic and profound:

God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son (22:8).

This is precisely what happens with the ram caught in the thicket. God provides a substitute to die, so Isaac (God's people!) can live.

Throughout the Old Testament, God is preparing us for the Gospel: for His profound plan to both uphold justice and extend mercy to the sinful seed of Adam and Eve. We begin to see in this scene what that will entail. *God will provide a substitute to die so that His people can live.* This is why Jesus is referred to as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

Abraham was more correct than he knew when he said to Isaac: *God himself will provide a lamb.*

## **The Father giving us His Son**

Then there is the image of God Himself (the Greater Father) bringing His own beloved Son (the Greater Isaac) up the mount of Jerusalem. But for God's Son, no substitute was provided, because Jesus himself was the substitute. And for God's Son the hand of the slayer wasn't held back. *Why?* Because,

God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16).

The events of Genesis 22 are not about human moral inquiry; they are about God revealing to man the heart of His love—His Gospel—just how far God will go to save lost humanity. When humanity failed in the great test of life (which following Adam and Eve we all have), God will provide a substitute to die, so we can live. And that substitute was God’s Son, His only Son, whom He loved—His Isaac!

## **God removes the earthly cup so we can drink from His Fountain**

If we could draw from this a lesson for us, we would want to consider just what it is that divine testing is really meant to do. It seems that Genesis 22 shows us that God’s ultimate test for us is meant to bring us to the end of ourselves, the end of all earthly and human hope. But not to crush us.

God removes from us the cup of earthly joys so that he can take us to the fountain of living water.

- He withholds bread so that we learn “that man does not live by bread alone” (Deuteronomy 8:2-3).
- He withholds a cup of earthly gladness, to teach us how to drink from His fount of divine fellowship.
- Even, at times, He withholds life, to give us true life.

And is it not the case, that often, when we have to lose so much in order to find God—it is in finding God that we realize He is what we have been thirsting for all along?

When God tests you, dear friend, trust that He does so in order to prove to you that He can, and will, provide.

Abraham come down the mountain the same way he went up—together with his son. But surely, he was forever changed. And if the poet were summing the scene, understanding how it pointed to that day when Christ, resurrected from the dead, would rejoin his Heavenly Father, she might say: “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”<sup>14</sup>



And I can't help but picture Abraham today, on that mount that is carved of jewels, glistening in the New Jerusalem—standing there with his son. An event has passed between this father and son that few mortals would understand. But there is One who understands, before whom these two mortals do bow: The Greater Father, with His Greater Isaac—the only begotten Son, who for the sake of God's children, was taken up to Mount Moriah, and slain.

And Abraham would leave this church with a single and abiding cry:

***Oh, dear people of God, trust in the name, Jehovah-Jireh. He will Provide. He will Provide. On the mount of the Lord, He will provide.***

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## Endnotes

1. C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 30.
2. Ibid., C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 19.
3. In the days of Jeremiah, God says of the rebellious sons of Judah, “<sup>31</sup> They have built the high places of Topheth, which is in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, nor did it come into my mind. (Jer 7:31).
4. “for our God is a consuming fire” (Heb 12:29).
5. Examples of God testing His people, include: The Lord allows a false prophet to come among the Israelites, luring them to follow other gods. But the Lord says, “You shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams. For the Lord your God is **testing** you, to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deut 13:2-3). When Israel is settling in the Promise Land, God allows other nations to exert influence upon them—the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, to name a few—, and we hear: “They were for the **testing** of Israel, to know whether Israel would obey the commandments of the Lord” (see Judges 3:2-4). In the wilderness, when God feeds Israel but ask them only to gather enough for

the day, we read: "Then the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I am about to rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may **test** them, whether they will walk in my law or not" (Ex. 16:4). After the Ten Commandments are given, "Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled, and they stood far off <sup>19</sup> and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die." <sup>20</sup> Moses said to the people, "Do not fear, for God has come to **test** you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin." <sup>21</sup> The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was" (Ex. 20:18). And in Deuteronomy, "And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, **testing** you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. <sup>3</sup> And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. (Deut 8:2-3). "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, <sup>3</sup> for you know that the **testing** of your faith produces steadfastness. <sup>4</sup> And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:2).

6. C. S. Lewis captures so well God's commitment to refashion us: "We are, not metaphorically but in very truth, a Divine work of art, something that God is making, and therefore something with which He will not be satisfied until it has a certain character" (C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 34).

7. Maimonides, the Jewish Philosopher, lists them as follows:

1. God tells him to leave his homeland to be a stranger in the land of Canaan.
2. Immediately after his arrival in the Promised Land, he encounters a famine.
3. The Egyptians seize his beloved wife, Sarah, and bring her to Pharaoh.
4. Abraham faces incredible odds in the battle of the four and five kings.
5. He marries Hagar after not being able to have children with Sarah.
6. G-d tells him to circumcise himself at an advanced age.
7. The king of Gerar captures Sarah, intending to take her for himself.
8. G-d tells him to send Hagar away after having a child with her.

9. His son, Ishmael, becomes estranged.
  10. G-d tells him to sacrifice his dear son Isaac upon an altar.
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8. R. W. L. Moberly, "Christ as the Key to Scripture: Genesis 22 Reconsidered," pages 143-173 in *He Swore an Oath: Biblical Themes from Genesis 12-50*, second edition (Wipf & Stock, Eugene, Oregon: 1994), 157.
  9. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, Revised Edition (Westminster Press, Philadelphia: 1976), 244.
  10. Charles Spurgeon, "Abraham's Trial: A Lesson for Believers."
  11. "There is no need to doubt ... that Abraham's sacrifice took place on the site of the later Jerusalem" (T. C. Mitchel, "Moriah," *NBD*, 794; Waltke, *Genesis*, 306); "There can be little doubt that as the story stands the place is none other than Jerusalem, as rabbinic tradition has always recognized" (Moberly, "Christ as the Key to Scripture," 157).
  12. Perhaps an Israelite is reading this while Israel is in exile in Babylon. Perhaps they feel that their sins have brought the judgement of God upon them, in the form of Babylon. And the knife is raised in Babylon's hand, and they will soon be slaughtered.
  13. "*Genesis Rabbah*, the Jewish midrash, comments that Isaac with the wood on his back is like a condemned man, carrying his own cross." See Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 108.
  14. The words of Julian of Norwich.