ABRAHAM: THE TEST OF FAITH

Hebrews 11:17-19

In chapter five of his best-selling book *The Purpose Driven Life*, Rick Warren suggests that life is a trust, a temporary assignment, and a test. I think he's right about that. God tests our faith in various ways throughout our lives. Why?

As the Union Pacific Railroad was being constructed, an elaborate trestle bridge was built across a large canyon in the West. Wanting to test the bridge, the builder loaded a train with enough extra cars and equipment to double its normal payload. The train was then driven to the middle of the bridge, where it stayed an entire day. One worker asked, "Are you trying to break this bridge?" "No," the builder replied, "I’m trying to prove that the bridge won’t break." ~ *Today in the Word*, March 14, 1991

We've been looking at Old Testament characters who demonstrated the kind of faith the writer of Hebrews defined: "**the substance of things hoped for; the evidence of things not seen.**" This morning, the text that unfolds leads us back to Abraham - "the father of the faithful." His ultimate test of faith was not in leaving his native city and country for a land that God would show him. Nor was it in patiently waiting for God to fulfill His promise about a son being born to him in his old age. His greatest test came when God told him to take his son Isaac and literally offer him as a sacrifice.

*PLAY VIDEO: ABRAHAM AND ISAAC* [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bxsIGuEiy-Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bxsIGuEiy-Q)

Some of the comments on the YOUTUBE page:

- "No one should ever be willing to kill their own child! only a psychotic *expletive* would request such a thing."

- "Very good movie about how sick the Bible really is. Thanks for showing it. Abraham and his God should be locked up in an insane house, where they can get treatment. If I were a Christian, there's no way that I will be able stay a Christian after viewing this video."

- "This so called "all loving god" is nothing more than a bully. A Kim Jong Un like celestial dictator. This being, even if it did exist, not only doesn't deserve worship but deserves all of Humanity working towards a means of killing it to prevent it from committing more evil acts."
What kind of loving and wise creator of all things would put his follower in such a terrible scenario? There is absolutely no justifiable logic for such a cold blooded and evil act.

That's the kind of things people say who see this scene in isolation - apart from the broader context. Yes, they are bitter towards God. Negative comments far out-number positive ones on the page. It reflects what a lot of non-believers think. This emotional scene is recorded in Genesis 22. The writer of the New Testament book Hebrews, after highlighting Sarah as a woman of faith, returns to her husband Abraham to further illustrate genuine faith.

By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced 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 will be reckoned.” Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death. (Hebrews 11:17-19)

What was God up to? After He had miraculously fulfilled his promise to enable Abraham and Sarah to become biological parents in their old age, He chose to put Abraham to the supreme test by asking him to do the unthinkable. By the way, the word "tested" immediately tips us off that God did not intend to have Isaac sacrificed. Of course Abraham didn't know it at the time.

It's one thing to claim to trust God’s Word when waiting for something; it's quite another to trust and obey His His Word after it's been received. This was a test of how much Abraham would obey Him. Would he cling to Isaac the promised one, now that he had him, or would he still obey and return him to God? In other words, how far would Abraham go in his obedience?

This is the first time the word "tested" is used in the Bible (Gen. 22:1). If this is a template for genuine faith, we might conclude from this shocking episode in the life of Abraham that our faith hasn’t really been tested until God "asks us to bear what seems unbearable, to do what seems unreasonable, and to expect what seems impossible." [http://jaymack.net/genesis-commentary/Fm-Sacrifice-Your-Son-Isaac.asp](http://jaymack.net/genesis-commentary/Fm-Sacrifice-Your-Son-Isaac.asp)

Why does God test his children?

Tests Reveal our True Identity

In the parable of the sower (Matt. 13) Jesus said that the one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the one who hears the word and receives it with joy. But
when trouble or persecution come because of the word, he quickly falls away. The one who received the seed that fell among thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it out, making it unfruitful. Trouble, persecution, worries, and the deceitfulness of wealth revealed their true identity as non-believers.

Tests Reveal our Faith
The apostle Peter wrote to encourage the saints:
In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. (1 Peter 1:6-7)

Tests Teach Us to Rely on God
God sometimes puts us in uncomfortable positions that bring pain, pressure, and sorrow - in order to cause us to trust Him more. "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead." (2 Cor. 1:8-9)

Tests Are For Our Good
God had promised to lead His people to a land flowing with milk and honey - an expression of bounty and prosperity. But on the 40-year journey through the desolate wilderness, He gave them a staple - manna which they harvested every day. "He gave you manna to eat in the desert, something your fathers had never known, to humble and to test you so that in the end it might go well with you" (Deut. 8:16). The plainness of the manna would only make them appreciative the glory of the Promised Land more! What we are experiencing here in this earthly life will only enable us to appreciate heavenly glory more!

Tests aren't for God...They're for Us.
God wasn’t testing Abraham to find out what he'd do in that situation. He already knew that. He doesn’t need to test us to find out what we’re made of either. He already knows. God tested Abraham for Abraham’s sake and for those who'd come after him. Can you imagine the strength of faith Abraham had after this event? What about Isaac? It certainly would have produced an unshakable faith in his life!
Why does God test his children? Because tests reveal and mold our character.

**Types of Tests**
What kind of tests might we face? Based on tests some Bible characters faced, we might be tested by:

- promises that are delayed (Abraham).
- major changes in our life (Sarah).
- problems that seem insurmountable (Gideon).
- criticism that is undeserved (David)
- what appear to be senseless tragedies (Job).

Think of those who have suffered great loss from Hurricanes Irma and Harvey. Will they curse God, or will they find Him to be a fortress and strength?

When we begin to understand that life is a test, we'll start realizing that situations we assumed were merely random events weren't really accidents at all. Tons of things we may think are trivial happenstance aren't so insignificant at all. God tests us often and in many different ways. And they have eternal implications. As R. C. Sproul likes to say: "Right now counts forever."

God wants us to pass the tests. **Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised for those who love Him.** (James 1:12)

How did Abraham have the spiritual fortitude to the unthinkable - to be willing to sacrifice his own flesh and blood? The passage here in Hebrews tells us. **Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead...**

Now that is faith! **Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.**

Logic and faith are companions. The Bible doesn't just teach that faith is only **compatible** with thinking, it insists that faith requires and stimulates the most profound reasoning and rationality. In this hour of decision when every emotional fiber within Abraham cried out "No! I could never kill my son!" he stopped and reasoned. What was his logical, rational conclusion? God is faithful. He had proven himself again and again.

When he was impotent and Sarah was barren; when both of their bodies were as good as dead as far as procreation was concerned - God renewed them!
In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations; as he had been told, “So shall your descendants be.” He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead because he was about a hundred years old, or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. (Romans 4:18-21)

Abraham was convinced that God would raise his son Isaac from the dead; that he would inherit the covenant promises and a great nation would flow from him.

But Isaac was not the ultimate fulfillment of the promise. Jesus of Nazareth was the true and greater heir of God’s promises (Gal. 3:16). He was the “only Son” Who died upon a mountain at the hands of His Father. He was the “only Son” through Whom grace, mercy and blessing would flow to the nations.

What wonder and mystery to know for certain that you and I are called offspring of Abraham (Gal. 3:29), not through physical descent but through union with Christ, the fulfillment of all God’s promises (2 Cor. 1:20). As Abraham’s sons and daughters, we are sons and daughters of the good and generous Father - through faith in the One true and faithful Son.

The first mention of the word "love" in the Bible is Genesis 22:2. It's portrayed by the love of a godly father for his unique son. It's a picture of the love that exists between God the Father and His Eternal Son. Yet God gave His beloved Son for us!

He came two thousand years later as the final and definitive sacrifice, abolishing the need for anymore blood sacrifices. Jesus is described as our great high priest before the Father, having offered the sacrifice once and for all, and now interceding for his people.

But we, as a kingdom of priests, a "royal priest-hood" continue to offer sacrifices. If not blood sacrifices for sin, what kind do we offer? The psalmist says: “Oh that men would praise the LORD for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men! And let them sacrifice the sacrifices of thanksgiving, and declare His works with rejoicing” (Psalm 107:21-22)

What are the “sacrifices of thanksgiving”?

The Sacrifice of Your Person
God doesn't just want what we possess. He wants us!
I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Rom. 12:1-2)

Why should you give your body to Him? Because He gave His body for you. We are to offer every part of ourselves to Him. But as many have pointed out, the problem with "a living sacrifice" is that it has a tendency to keep crawling off the altar.

You have longed for sweet peace, and for faith to increase,
And have earnestly, fervently prayed; but you cannot have rest,
Or be perfectly blest, until all on the altar is laid.

Is your all on the altar of sacrifice laid?
Your heart does the Spirit control?
You can only be blest, and have peace and sweet rest,
As you yield Him your body and soul. (Elisha Hoffman)

The Sacrifice of Your Praise
Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. (Heb. 13:15) Praise to God doesn’t begin and end at a worship service in a church building; it merely continues there. Each day we should live in a continual attitude of praise. The reason some of us do such a poor job of praising God publicly is that we've not been praising Him privately.

The Sacrifice of Your Possessions
“And don’t forget to do good and to share with those in need. These are the sacrifices that please God." (Heb. 13:16) We are to be giving back to God our material possessions as a spiritual sacrifice. Does your giving show what you think of God? Proverbs 3:9 says: “Honor the LORD with your wealth and with the best part of every-thing you produce." God doesn’t want “a place” in your life. He doesn’t even want to be “a priority.” The Creator of the universe demands preeminence.

The Sacrifice of Your Prayer
Accept my prayer as incense offered to you,
and my upraised hands as an evening offering. (Ps.141:2)

Seventeenth-century Puritan preacher John Bunyon - author of "Pilgrim's Progress" wrote "Pray often, for prayer is a shield to the soul, a sacrifice to God, and a scourge to Satan."
May God help us to pass the test of faith and enable us to respond to his great love for us in the sacrifice of our person, our praise, our possessions, and our prayers!