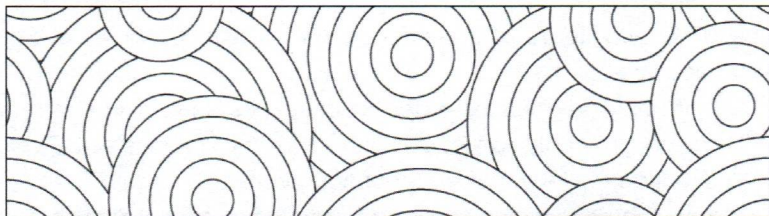


LESSON 2

ABRAHAM'S GREAT TEST

GENESIS 22:1-14



OPEN IT UP

Genesis 22 is one of the most shocking chapters in the Bible. After waiting for the child of promise some twenty-five years, Abraham finally receives the blessed son through whom his lineage would come. Isaac was the key to all the promises and the capstone of a lifetime of service to God. Then God commands Abraham to kill him. Why? It cannot be that God desires child sacrifice. He doesn't (Deuteronomy 12:29–31; 18:10). The command comes because God wishes to test Abraham's faith (Genesis 22:1). All along in his life story, Abraham has served God in search of the promised child. The question can be reasonably asked, "Does Abraham serve God only to get what he wants, or does Abraham serve God because he loves Him?"

GOD'S DIRECTIVE • GENESIS 22:1-5

Why did God test Abraham (Genesis 22:1)? Only two parties are involved. First is, of course, the "tester," God Himself. God had no need to test Abraham, for the purpose of every test is to demonstrate learning. Since God is all-knowing, God's ignorance is not the reason for the test. Second is Abraham, the "tested." Abraham might learn

something new about himself; he might have to consider whether or not to obey God. He might, through his inner struggle, discover that he loves God *more than* he loves his precious son. Indeed, this must be the purpose of the test. Abraham's command was a trial of faith. As Jesus teaches, "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:26). Faith trumps family.

When God gives the order, He describes Isaac in tender terms: "Your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love" (Genesis 22:2). The description reminds the reader of how precious Isaac is. Then God follows the description with an order to "offer him there as a burnt offering" (verse 2). No explanation is given; Abraham is simply expected to obey. Sometimes God asks us to do things we don't want to do. It may be hard *not* to gossip (Romans 1:29 ESV). It may be difficult to forgive (Colossians 3:13). Still, God's order requires us to obey. And that is exactly what Abraham does.

Abraham seems to obey God immediately. He (1) got out of bed early, (2) "saddled his donkey," (3) recruited "two" servants to accompany him and his son, (4) split the wood in preparation for the sacrifice, and (5) left for Moriah (Genesis 22:3). Faith means we act even when we do not understand. And we act with urgency, doing our best to execute the order God gives, trusting that He will bless our faithfulness. Abraham must have had this thought throughout his test, for he declares to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey; the lad and I will go yonder and worship, and we will come back to you" (verse 5). Note Abraham's confidence that he *and Isaac* would return. But it is not enough to have the confidence in God; we must, like Abraham, follow through with obedience.

ISAAC'S QUERY • GENESIS 22:6-8

We have no idea exactly how old Isaac is at this point. Obviously, he is old enough to carry wood sufficient to fully incinerate his body (Genesis 22:6) since burnt offerings required the total consummation of the animal in flames (Leviticus 6:10). With Isaac carrying the wood, Abraham himself took the kindling (what the NKJV calls "fire")

and “knife” (Genesis 22:6). The word *knife* is rarely used in the Old Testament and is designed to slice up large animals—or even human bodies (Judges 19:29). Abraham set out with every intention of obeying God’s order to sacrifice his son.

As the two of them went, Isaac speaks for the first and last time. Although Isaac’s name is mentioned nineteen times in the chapter, Isaac himself speaks only seven words (in Hebrew). And these words must have pierced the heart of Abraham: “My father. ... Look, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” (Genesis 22:7). Abraham’s response to his son is one of faith: “My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering” (verse 8). The word translated *provide* in the Old Testament means “to see.” We might paraphrase Abraham’s words, “God will see to it Himself.” But there is a deeper application. God sees things we cannot and is therefore in a better position to prepare our future than we are. The very word *providence* is derived from the Latin term meaning “seeing before” (*providentia*). Abraham understood that God was preparing for him and his son a future that he could not yet understand. Faith does not mean we have a plan; faith means we trust God’s plan even when it is unclear.

ABRAHAM’S FAITH • GENESIS 22:9-14

God allowed Abraham to get deep into the process of child sacrifice. He allowed him (1) to reach “the place,” (2) to build the altar, (3) to arrange the wood, (4) to bind his son, (5) to lay him on the altar, (6) and to take the knife with the intention of killing him (Genesis 22:9–10). Only after Abraham’s intentions were clear did “the Angel of the LORD” order him to stop. The angel’s words are curious: “Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me” (verse 12). The word *know* perhaps here implies “know by experience.” The angel had learned of Abraham’s faith in a whole new light. But there is more to the angel’s compliment.

For the first time, someone in Scripture is said to “fear God” (Genesis 22:12). Although Abraham found no “fear of God” in Gerar (20:11), no individual is yet characterized in this way. The expression,

of course, is common in biblical wisdom literature (e.g., Job 28:28; Proverbs 1:7; Ecclesiastes 12:13). Fundamentally, it means one respects and honors God above all else in life—above health, wealth, fame, and family. Abraham had enough faith to do *anything* God asked of him and thus had reached the highest goal for humanity.

Finding “a ram caught in a thicket,” Abraham was able to use the altar, knife, kindling, and wood to substitute the animal for his son (Genesis 22:13). The place is named “Jehovahjireh” (KJV) to commemorate the great event, translated in the NKJV “The-LORD-Will-Provide” (verse 14). Again the term means literally “the Lord will see,” implying God’s all-knowing ability and all-loving disposition to those who serve Him.

Although these verses do not tell us what Abraham was thinking during his test, the author of Hebrews thankfully does: “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac ... concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense” (Hebrews 11:17–19). Because of God’s “seed promise” to Abraham, the great patriarch believed that Isaac *could not die*. Somehow, someway, God was bound by His previous promises. So, even if Abraham sacrificed his son, God would raise him up for the sake of His previous promise. Abraham did not know the future, but he knew the past. He had learned to trust God, certain that God would follow through with rewards.

WRAP IT UP

The story of Abraham's life reaches a climax in Genesis 22. The binding of Isaac was Abraham's last and greatest trial as far as we are told, and God still puts His people through trials (James 1:2–3). These are not comfortable, but they are effective at helping us learn to lean on God and reach our highest spiritual state (2 Corinthians 12:7–10). The only way for a runner to improve is to test himself by training and competition. The pain, fatigue, and failure will help the runner reach his full potential. Spiritually, too, we are in a race (cf. Hebrews 12:1–2). We need to be tested in order to advance to our greatest spiritual potential. So “do not despise the chastening of the LORD” (Proverbs 3:11).



THINK ON IT

1. Why do you think God tested Abraham? What was the benefit of the test?

2. What lessons can we learn from Abraham's obedience to God's order?

3. What does it mean for God to provide? How are God's provisions connected to His providence? How does this discussion relate to Genesis 22?

4. Discuss Abraham's belief that God would raise Isaac from the dead. How does this information help us better interpret his actions in Genesis?

5. How do trials help us build faith in God?