

## Genesis 22:1-14 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." <sup>2</sup>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 that I shall show you." <sup>3</sup>So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac; he cut the wood for the burnt offering, and set out and went to the place in the distance that God had shown him. <sup>4</sup>On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place far away. <sup>5</sup>Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; the boy and I will go over there; we will worship, and then we will come back to you." <sup>6</sup>Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together. <sup>7</sup>Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" <sup>8</sup>Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together.

<sup>9</sup>When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. <sup>10</sup>Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill<sup>[a]</sup> his son. <sup>11</sup>But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." <sup>12</sup>He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy 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." <sup>13</sup>And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. <sup>14</sup>So Abraham called that place "The LORD will provide";<sup>[b]</sup> as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided."<sup>[c]</sup>

Sunday, July 5, 2020

"THE TEST WE ALL FACE"

Genesis 22:1-14; Romans 8:32

In school I disliked tests. I sometimes felt that the mark I received didn't reflect the studying I had done or my knowledge of the subject. Of course, there were times also that I received a higher mark than I deserved and passed only by the grace of God. And the older I got, the more I came to dislike tests. I was so nervous that it took me five minutes to gather my thoughts and get started. As time went on, I came to prefer courses with just essays and no final written exam.

Well, tests come to us all, throughout life. I read of a pastor who was making a wooden trellis for a climbing vine. As he was hammering, he noticed a boy watching him. The youngster didn't say a word, and the preacher kept on working. Pleased that the boy was admiring his work, the pastor finally said, "Well son, trying to pick up some pointers on carpentry?" "No," he replied. "I'm just waiting to hear what a preacher says when he hits his thumb with a hammer." I'm not sure I would pass that test. But I did pass the COVID-19 test I had a couple of weeks ago. It came back negative. And for those of you who might fear having such a test, I found a little uncomfortable for a few brief moments, but really no big deal at all.

Sometimes our faith is tested. In fact, it's a test we all face. Are we trusting the god of our own imagining? Or are we trusting in the God who did not withhold his only Son but gave him up for all of us?

Abraham's faith was tested, more severely than ours ever will be. We end our mini-series on Abraham with a perplexing passage from Genesis 22. It begins, "Some time later God tested Abraham." God said, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. "Take your son Isaac, whom you love – the promised son born after years of waiting –and sacrifice him as a burnt offering on the mountain."

Why would God ask Abraham to do such a thing? I think God gave him this test in order to see if Abraham was really trusting in God. Abraham was a man of faith, but occasionally his faith had faltered. One of these times resulted in another son being born to Abraham - Ishmael, whose birth caused strife in Abraham's tent and a problem for God. So now God wanted to know if Abraham's faith had grown stronger since those episodes. And it was not just a matter of God seeing if Abraham really trusted God but also if God could really trust Abraham. The father of the great nation that would bring blessing to all nations had to be faithful and trustworthy, a man who would do what God commanded.

Now Abraham knew about the child sacrifices practiced by surrounding nations in order to appease their false gods. So God's strange command to sacrifice Isaac went against all that Abraham knew about the true and living God. God. Furthermore, the strange command undermined all that God had

promised to do through Abraham – make a great nation. But still Abraham set out in faith to do as God commanded. With troubled heart he saddled the family donkey and took the materials for sacrifice.

As they got closer to Mount Moriah, Isaac asked, “Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Abraham replied, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering.” There on the mountain Abraham built an altar and arranged the wood. He bound his dear son to the altar. He stretched out his arm and took the knife. The old man’s hand began to shake. Tears filled his eyes. The strain was incredible. Slowly his trembling arm raised up, the metal knife flashed in the sunlight, and just then - God stopped him. The angel said, “Do not lay your hand on the lad...for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.”

What a great relief for both Abraham and Isaac. Abraham had passed the test. Now God knew for sure that Abraham really trusted God and that God could really trust Abraham.

Abraham then took a ram caught in the thicket and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of Isaac. Abraham called the place, “The Lord will provide; as it is said to this day, “On the mount of the Lord it shall be provided.” God had provided the lamb for sacrifice, just as Abraham said he would. No doubt this was God’s plan all along. He never intended that Isaac would be killed. By stopping Abraham, God was saying to Israel and any other nation that would listen, “I abhor child sacrifice and I do not require it. It must never be practiced in Israel or anywhere else. I myself will provide whatever sacrifice I require.”

The greatest comment on this story comes from Paul in Romans 8:32. Paul even quotes the story. God said to Abraham, “you have not withheld your son, your only Son from me.” And Paul writes about God, “He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?”

“God did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us.” God gave Jesus Christ to die in our place, as our substitute. This is how much God loves us, that God himself provided the necessary sacrifice for our sin, and that sacrifice, was, wait for it, God himself, in the person of his only Son. This is the true God and living God whom we are called to trust with all our being – the God who did not withhold his own Son but gave him up for us all.

Does God test our faith? Perhaps. Or at least he allows it to happen. Good companies test products extensively and rigorously before releasing them to the public. That’s why it is taking so long to come up with a cure and vaccine for Covid-19. Testing can be good for our faith too, if it rids us of faulty faith and moves us to put our faith the true and living God. Certainly God tested

his own Son's faith, to make sure that he would be obedient all the way to the cross. But generally God doesn't have to test our faith directly. Life itself will do that. Suffering, loss, disappointment, discouragement can really put our faith to the test.

But there is one area where people's faith can really get off track and needs always to be tested and corrected. Now can you imagine that some ancient peoples believed they had to offer their first born as a sacrifice to their god? Well, they did. Incredibly, just as slavery is still practiced in some parts of the world, so too is child sacrifice. Now of course, this practice rightfully horrifies us. But many of us still believe that we must make some great sacrifice in order earn God's good favour. And so we offer up to God the sacrifice of good works, or religious practice, or some act of self-denial or even a good and moral life. Now these works and these sacrifices are good and certainly have their place but cannot atone for our sin. In fact, these sacrifices are responses to God's prior and gracious sacrifice on our behalf.

For the Gospel is this – the sacrifice that God requires for our sin, God himself has provided. We don't have to bring a lamb or anything else, because God has given the perfect, sinless lamb who takes away the sin of the world. God did not withhold his own Son but gave him up for all of us. It was not on Mount Moriah, but on the nearby mount of Calvary where God provided the once for all sacrifice. The crucified God-man is God's clear message to the world. Through Christ God says to us, "In love for you I did not withhold my own Son, but gave him up for all of you. I paid the price for you, and in my Son I myself made the sacrifice. And you are saved as you put all your faith in the Crucified One whom I raised from the dead to live forevermore. He is your Advocate who will bring you safely through judgement to eternal life."

So the Gospel message both tests and corrects our faith. The symbols of bread and wine in the sacrament clearly proclaim the One to whom our faith must be directed and given. "My faith looks up to thee, O Lamb of Calvary, Saviour divine." The writer of those words passed the test of faith just as you and I do as we look up in faith to the same Lamb of God.

Let's look once more at Paul's verse. "He who did not withhold his own Son but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?" It is a question, but there is no doubt about the answer. The answer is emphatically "Yes." Paul is reasoning here from the greater to the smaller. If God provided for our greatest need, then he can be trusted to provide everything else we really need. For as Jesus tells us, "Your Heavenly Father knows what you need. So seek first his Kingdom and his righteousness, in other words seek to do God's will first and involve yourself in the work of his Kingdom on earth, and these things will be added unto you."

For over a year I was praying for an individual, for God to provide for this person's special need. Well, it took a long time and there were setbacks and discouragements along the way. But then the answer came, rather suddenly, and the provision came in exactly the right way. And I'm still praying for that person, for healing in other aspects of their life, and that's being answered slowly, but I see God's hand at work.

There are many mysteries in life, much we don't understand, much still to be revealed to us. God may not do exactly what you want when you want it, but God's provision will always be wise, loving, and timely. Remember this, "He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else we truly need?" Abraham shows us, Paul tells us, and the empty tomb proclaims that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ can really be trusted, in this life and for the life to come. So let me ask - do you trust this God, and just as importantly, can God trust you to be a faithful follower?