

# The Testing of Faith

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, make sure Genesis 22 is in front of you. What a passage, isn't it? What a story. So we're just going to work through that story in a moment. There's also a sermon outline that might help you along to follow the logic of this sermon, possibly.

So that might help for some of you. But above all, we need God's help. Let's pray. Father, I am indeed just a weak instrument, even a weak servant, Lord.

And as I come to you, I find it difficult, in a sense, Lord, to bring this story because it's such an amazing story. And yet, I don't feel like I'm worthy to bring this story.

But Father, I just pray now by your Holy Spirit, you would be working, working in our hearts, working to help all of us as we consider what you have to say to us through Genesis 22, that you might strengthen our faith, that you might indeed challenge us where we need to be challenged.

And so that above all, we might keep on persevering and living for you. We thank you that you are faithful, and we trust that you are faithful even now as you bring to us your word.

[ 1 : 16 ] All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Earlier this year, a 100-kilometer mountain race was held in northwest China. 172 people took part, including a couple of well-known marathon runners, such as one of China's top Paralympic athletes.

It was sunny and even a little warm as the race got underway. But 90 minutes into the race, the weather abruptly changed. There was strong wind and freezing rain, with the temperature dropping as low as zero degrees Celsius.

The big problem was that the runners were all wearing thin clothes as the organisers had not made it compulsory to have extra layers. And sadly, the event turned tragic.

21 of the runners were eventually confirmed dead from hypothermia. One experienced marathoner, who had run that trail before but didn't participate this year, told journalists, the weather always changes like this.

But the organisers did not take extreme weather into consideration. They had been completely unprepared. In the Christian life, we're going to be facing all kinds of weather.

[ 2 : 26 ] Sometimes, life is like those nice, warm stretches of sunny weather with just a hint of the breeze and we love it. Sometimes it gets a little gloomier with rain trickling down from the skies, which isn't so fun.

And occasionally, just occasionally, extreme weather hits. Sometimes, all of a sudden, the storm comes and the flash floods arrive, leaving havoc in their wake.

Consider how none of us, of course, would have foreseen the circumstances that we're living in now just two years ago. But that's how the Christian life is like. We're going to be facing all kinds of weather.

And preparation is important. That's what Genesis 22 is here for. It's here to tell us that extreme weather could happen.

It's here to tell us that faith could be tested, even from unexpected places. And it's here to prepare us. It's here to help us finish the race.

[ 3 : 31 ] And the way it prepares us is multi-layered. On the top layer, we're given a pattern, a prototype, a paradigm of sorts through the person of Abraham.

Someone we look to as an example. We're going to see that when we get into the story proper. But on the bottom layer, it also paints a picture, a portrait, a photo of God himself working in mysterious ways to showcase his goodness as he accomplishes his eternal purposes.

As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts, the Lord declares through the prophet Isaiah. And that is particularly true of Genesis 22.

For the very nature of this story is a little unsettling, is it not? Genesis 22 is probably the most well-known episode in the entire Abraham story.

And perhaps its very familiarity has desensitized us somewhat. But this can be a deeply unsettling story because of what is asked and what is done.

[ 4 : 43 ] And those elements, what is asked and what is done, highlight just how radical the nature of true faith is. But at the same time, those elements, if not placed within their proper context, can become toxic.

Why? Well, because this passage is often taught to be teaching blind faith. Many people, whether Christian or non-Christian, wrongly believe that this is a passage that teaches how a believer, when prompted by the inner voice of God, are allowed to act irrationally because they believe they are obeying God.

They wrongly believe that's what true faith is. Now, for Christians, this is seen as something positive because, hey, doesn't the New Testament tell us to be fools for Christ? Isn't acting irrationally if done in faith, a badge of honour?

And so it's seen as something positive. For non-Christians, however, it's seen as the opposite. It's something negative because in their minds, it conjures up pictures of religious fanatics.

After all, aren't those suicide bombers always doing what they do because they say that they are obeying what God told them to do? Isn't that why Genesis 22 is dangerous?

[ 6 : 09 ] Because it encourages such fanaticism? And in both cases, whether Christian or non-Christian, the same mistake is made.

They've assumed that what is being taught here is blind faith. A faith that has no basis, no rhyme or reason as to why people are asked to do what they do.

And that is why verse 1 of today's passage is so important. It's there to make sure that our interpretation of this passage doesn't start off on the wrong foot. It provides the context for biblical faith.

Now, what does verse 1 say? Some time later, God tested Abraham. That's what it says in the NIV. But actually, more literally, it says, after these things, God tested Abraham as in the ESV.

Now you ask, what things? Well, everything that has gone on so far before in this Abraham story. So let's recap what's happened so far.

[ 7 : 17 ] In Genesis 12, Abraham goes in obedience to God to an unknown land to secure a blessing that would come about through his seed. He ends up in Egypt where God rescues him by having miraculous plagues fall on Pharaoh and the household.

In Genesis 14, he overcomes four powerful kings in one night. Thanks to God. And then in Genesis 15, the same Lord appears to him in a vision, renewing his promise in covenant form with that rather memorable picture of a blazing fire pot.

In Genesis 17 and 18, God visits Abraham, giving him a word of promise each time. And then in Genesis 19, Abraham sees God acting in judgment first hand against Sodom and Gomorrah.

And then last week, he saw God protecting him from Abimelech, striking him with some disease, then using Abraham to heal him. And then most wonderfully of all, he saw the long-awaited child Isaac being born in his old age.

And so throughout the entire Abraham story, Abraham has seen God act in incredible ways. He's seen a variety of miracles, some on a pretty large scale, some up close and personal, over a long period of time.

[ 8 : 43 ] And he's seen God keep his word again and again and again. He has seen absolutely nothing to indicate that God was not to be trusted. On the contrary, God has done everything to prove himself trustworthy.

In other words, Abraham has justification to believe that God is good, God is reliable, God is consistent. His faith is not blind.

Genesis 12 to 21 constitutes a large body of evidence and Genesis 22 must be placed within that larger context.

But of course, I haven't given you the whole story, have I? As you very well know if you've been following along in this series. After all, why was Abraham down in Egypt in the very first place back in Genesis 12?

Well, he thought that maybe things would be better down there and he even lied to Pharaoh about Sarah, you might remember, to endure his safety. And all throughout, there are some hints that maybe he doubts he will have an heir.

[ 9 : 56 ] Is that why he doesn't discourage his nephew Lot from joining him? Even though in Genesis 12, God told him to leave his father's household that includes his extended family behind.

Is that why in Genesis 15, he suggests Eliezer, his servant, to be his heir? And in Genesis 16, he goes along with Sarah's plan to use Hagar as a surrogate mother?

Is that why last week, he lied again to Abimelech about Sarah? In other words, Abraham's life is hardly an example of pure faith.

Rather, we see him constantly stumbling along, always trying to put together his own clumsy schemes, schemes that only cause him grief.

We see him failing to trust God again and again. And so, after these things, after all of God's miracles, after all of Abraham's stumbles, the question now arises, has Abraham learned his lesson?

[ 11 : 11 ] After all these years, where is his relationship with God now at? Does he really trust God now?

And so, verse 1, after these things, God tested Abraham. This is a test, but not a test requiring Abraham to show blind faith.

Rather, it is a test to help him to step into genuine faith, to trust the already trustworthy one. One of the most interesting things I discovered this week is that in the Bible, God never tests unbelievers.

Only believers get tested. And in the Old Testament, whenever God tests, he does so with a few aims in mind, including to reveal the state of our hearts and to encourage a healthy fear of God in us.

I've put down a few verses on the outline for you to look up on your own if you want precise references. But the point is, God is not testing Abraham to play a prank on him and trip him up.

[ 12 : 27 ] Instead, he wants to produce in Abraham a perseverance that leads to character, a character that leads to hope, and then to have a hope that would not put him to shame.

And so that's the wider context which we must keep in mind to make sure that we don't go off track. And with that, let's enter properly into the narrative now.

And I want to go through this story under three different headings, the struggle of faith, the show of faith, and the substance of faith. So let's look at verses 1 and 2 and consider firstly the struggle of faith.

The weather has been good for Abraham, hasn't it? He and Sarah finally have Isaac. Don't forget for Abraham and Sarah, they've waited decades.

And finally, they have a child. a child for them to watch over, a child for them to bathe and feed and clothe and lose sleepless nights over, a child they have big dreams for, a child they hope to see grow up to be a fine young man, a child who has the very seal of God's blessing on him.

[ 13 : 51 ] Which is why verse 2 comes as a great shock. Give up Isaac, God says. Now, remember, Abraham has already lost his other son, Ishmael.

And now he's being asked to lose his remaining son too. There's a little lesson for us there, isn't it? Being one of God's people, being a recipient of God's blessing, doesn't protect you from times of having the struggle.

It doesn't protect you from extreme weather. And it doesn't protect you from feeling perplexed by God's words sometimes. Because notice, this extreme weather is brought about by God himself.

Now, to be fair, I doubt God will be asking us to do the exact same thing he asked of Abraham. There are several hints in the narrative that this is a unique request.

For one thing, although this is hidden from us in our English translations, God doesn't just say in verse 2, take your son. He actually says something more like, please take your son.

[ 15 : 09 ] It's there in the original Hebrew. He makes a tender plea. As he gives a difficult order, he's incredibly gentle. It's a highly unusual sort of thing that God is doing here.

you just almost never find this kind of thing going on in the Old Testament. God just issues comments usually. God knows he's making a big ask. This is Abraham's son, his only son, the son whom he loves.

And so he deals with Abraham compassionately. And the other hint is in the wording of verse 2. Did you notice how similar it is to Genesis 12 when God first spoke to Abraham?

God says, go, just like back in Genesis 12. And just like back in Genesis 12, he's to go to a place where God will show him.

Again, the same kind of phrasing. And so just like those promises of Genesis 12 are unique to Abraham, so is this situation.

[ 16 : 21 ] This test is where the journey of faith is all leading up to. If Genesis 12 is the beginning, then Genesis 22 is like the climax.

This is a moment of special significance. The moment where we're going to see whether or not God will really, really, really keep those Genesis 12 promises.

Is Abraham going to have this sentence? You see, there are no more major episodes in the Abraham story after this. This is the last time God speaks directly to Abraham.

And the stakes are high indeed. In Genesis 12, God asks Abraham to let go of his past. Leave behind your country and your family, he says.

But now in Genesis 22, God asks Abraham to let go of his future, his only son. It would be as if Sarah had never given birth to Isaac.

[ 17 : 26 ] It would be as if there was never any fulfillment of the promise. It would be as if everything was for nothing. Do you see how Abraham's commitment is being tested to the limit?

this is a request like none under in all biblical history. How could God request that the son of promise be sacrificed?

Can Abraham really trust God when he seems to be reversing his word of promise? And so actually, God's commitment is being tested to the limit too.

With this perplexing command, we wonder how will God fulfill his commitment to make Abraham into a great nation that will bless the world?

Will he? It all just doesn't make sense in light of what we know about God. And although I don't think God will be making this specific request of us, sometimes God will ask us to do stuff that's hard to understand, never mind follow.

[ 18 : 44 ] Sometimes God will act in ways that we find completely incomprehensible. That seems like he's lost the plot that makes us want to say to him, you sure Lord? Why would you do that Lord?

For some of the hardest struggles of faith come not just from general trials. Now, those are hard in life, hard enough, but we kind of know to expect them.

We know that there will be opposition to the gospel. We know that there will be those who resent those who live godly lives. We know we live in a fallen world where things like weakness and sickness still exist and will still afflict us.

The New Testament tells us that this is part and parcel of the Christian life and we kind of know to expect them. But the really tough part comes is when God's own ways don't seem to match up with his word.

It's when God's own ways don't seem to match up with his character. It's when we just can't make sense of what God is doing. That's the really tough part.

[ 19 : 56 ] It's certainly how I feel when I see clearly from the Bible how important embodied fellowship is. How important it is that we are to meet regularly and help each other live for Jesus.

And yet this very pandemic that God has permitted in this time seems specifically designed to stop us from doing just that. And I ask why?

Especially when it seems impossible to make decisions that fulfill all that scripture asks of us. It's how you might feel when you read the latest news about Afghanistan or Lebanon or frankly a hundred other places in this world.

It's probably how Mary and Martha felt when they told Jesus that their brother Lazarus was sick. But Jesus instead of immediately rushing to go and see them deliberately delays his journey by two more days.

And as a result Lazarus dies. And you just ask Jesus why? Sometimes God's methods are completely unfathomable to us. We don't get it.

[ 21 : 13 ] And yet Genesis 22 tells us don't be surprised if extreme weather hits. Don't be surprised if you experience God this way.

This is where the struggle of faith really hits home. And so how will Abraham respond? We move now to our second heading the show of faith.

The show of faith. In verse 3 Abraham gets up and he starts packing. He's going to embark on another journey of faith, the most agonising one of all.

But he does so. No arguing with God, no questioning, he does what he's told. Now notice how the narrative slows down here and goes into detail.

We see Abraham making preparations to present a burnt offering. We see Abraham setting out for the place God had told him about. This is no spur of the moment decision.

[ 22 : 20 ] This is a deliberate picture of obedience. But this isn't Abraham being a superhero. How hard it must be for him.

Notice how in verse 3, Abraham doesn't quite do things logically. It makes more sense to cut the wood first and then saddle the donkey. But he does it in reverse.

Perhaps this hints at his state of mind. He can't quite think straight. How could he? After all, at the heart of this episode is the father-son relationship.

We're never allowed to forget that. All throughout this story, the words father and son are constantly mentioned. And the father is being asked to sacrifice the son he loves.

In verse 4, we discover that the place Abraham is to travel to takes three days. And so that means he has three days to think about all that he's being asked to do.

[ 23 : 29 ] three days alone with his thoughts, with no one to share his questions or his pain. But he keeps walking with his son together.

And as they walk to the place of sacrifice, the tension keeps mounting. In verse 7, Isaac asks the innocent but obvious question, Papa, I know we're going to make an offering but where is the lamb?

Can you feel your heart wrenching at this point? And then in verses 9 and 10, time slows right down. Notice again the level of detail.

Abraham arrives. He builds an altar as he's been regularly doing since throughout Genesis 12 to 21. He binds his son Isaac. He lays him on the altar.

He takes out his knife. He raises it up. We're not spared the details. We're meant to feel it. And just as an aside, I want you to notice something.

[ 24 : 38 ] Notice that earlier in verse 6, Isaac is old enough to carry wood on his own. And so Isaac is definitely old enough to resist a hundred plus year old man.

But he doesn't. It seems to me that this is a show of faith, not just on the part of Abraham, but also of Isaac.

They really are walking together. But the focus is on what Abraham does. And this is an act of profound faith, is it not?

And that's certainly the conclusion James 2 verse 21 to 22 makes on the screen. Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?

You see that his faith and his actions were working together. And his faith was made complete by what he did. In other words, Abraham's actions match his faith.

[ 25 : 46 ] They show his faith. They prove his faith. That's what James concludes. You see, all throughout Genesis 12 to 21, Abraham has always been looking for alternatives to God's plans.

has he not? Whether that's proposing Eliezer as his heir, or going along with Sarah's plans to produce Ishmael, or deciding to call Sarah his sister, he's always looking at other options.

But here in Genesis 22, he has no alternative plan. He trusts God will somehow work things out to ensure his promises are kept.

And this is the kind of faith Jesus causes to trust him. To make no alternative plans which don't involve him. To take up our cross.

To really believe those promises of the gospel that in Christ, God only has affection for you. God never forsakes you. God will bring about a new world in relationship with you.

[ 26 : 53 ] Yes, to believe those promises even in extreme weather. God will come to God. But how can we have such faith? Let's keep looking at the passage. As they near the place of sacrifice, notice what Abraham says to his servants in verse 5.

Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.

Isaac and I. What's going on? Is Abraham still in denial at this point about what's going to happen?

Or perhaps he's lying, covering up what's about to happen to both his servants and more crucially, to his son. I know some of our Muslim friends think that this is what is happening here when they read this.

They think Abraham is acting dishonorably here, which is why they think the Bible is inaccurate at this point, because how can a prophet be this dishonorable?

[ 28 : 04 ] But I think they are mistaken in their interpretation. No, Abraham is not acting dishonorably here, but most honorably. For here we see his show of faith most clearly.

He believes God will not go back on his promise of giving him many descendants. No, he believes somehow or other, God will provide a way, and that will include preserving Isaac.

And that's why in verse 8, he says, God himself will provide what is required for the burnt offering. He's not massaging the truth, but declaring his faith in the life-giving power of God.

And this is made clear for us in Hebrews 11, 17-19 on the screen. 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.

[ 29 : 22 ] And so, in a manner of speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death. This is what Abraham was confident of. The Lord will provide.

He couldn't see how. He didn't know all the details. But he had the big picture. He had come to know, after so many decades, after ten chapters, that God could be trusted to do the right thing.

After all, had he not brought life from Sarah's dead womb in order to keep his covenant promises? And so, notice once again that this is not blind faith.

Notice what Hebrews 11 verse 19 says. Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead. By this point, he knew how God worked.

And so, there's a sound rationale to his confidence. And that's why he could make this particular journey of faith. My friends, how can we carry our cross daily?

[ 30 : 34 ] Because we have the big picture. We don't understand all that God is doing. I don't understand all that God is doing at this present time in history.

But we know that God is always good, always honorable, always praiseworthy. We know he keeps his promises, and we are sustained by the knowledge that he provides.

Because according to Genesis 22, that's exactly what he did. Just before the knife comes down, once again, God calls out verse 11 through the angel.

And just like back in verse 2, Abraham indicates he is at God's service. Here I am, he says. And now God says, here is your provision.

Here is a ram, verse 13. Offer it instead of your son. Kill it so that Isaac may live. You see, you could say in one sense that as Abraham passed the test, so had God.

[ 31 : 46 ] He's come through. He's been vindicated. And so Abraham was right all along to fear God, verse 12. Remember fearful Abraham from last week?

Remember how he feared his circumstances more than God? But now, we know he fears God. As his faith is tested, it's proven itself genuine.

And so has God. Abraham has been proven right all along to trust God. God has not gone back on his character. He's been the same God in Genesis 22 as in Genesis 12 to 21.

And so Abraham provides here for us a pattern. This is what faith looks like. This is how radical biblical faith is.

Christianity is not a look-see-look-see kind of faith. It's not a maybe I will, maybe I won't kind of faith. No, it demands every fiber of your being. It says you've got to go the whole way.

[ 32 : 59 ] Not 60%, not 80%, 100%. True biblical faith must be seen in action in obedience to God's word.

And that's what Genesis 22 encourages us to. For the mark of true faith is not how well we are doing, but what we do when we are not doing well.

The mark of true faith is not how well we are doing, but what we do when we are not doing well. In times of testing, will we show true faith?

But that's not all this is about. For we come to our final heading for today, the substance of faith. Notice in verse 14 that this event looks like it's to be commemorated for future generations.

This is something to be remembered. You know, the place is named. And what is to be remembered? Not so much that Abraham obeyed.

[ 34 : 09 ] That's not what the place is called. No, rather it is named the Lord will provide. Because that is what God is going to do.

In verse 17, God declares once again that he will keep his promises as he repeats the content not just of Genesis 12, but also Genesis 15 and 17.

And this time he adds the emphatic, surely, I will surely bless you. And for that promise to be fulfilled, the Lord will provide.

You see, what Abraham goes through here in Genesis 22 is probably the worst thing anyone could endure, isn't it? I have a young son, and to do something like what Abraham is called to do here is utterly unimaginable.

And this event can only make sense when we understand that Genesis 22 is part of a larger story. It's a part of a much larger story of how God intends to bless the whole world, of how he intends to overturn the sin and death that has wreaked so much damage in our world.

[ 35 : 25 ] For God is not just here offering Abraham as a pattern to emulate. He's painting a prophetic picture of what is to come.

For notice in verse 2 where God asks Abraham to go, the region of Moriah. Later on in 2 Chronicles 3 verse 1, we discover that this is the region where the temple will be built.

And so chronologically speaking, this story, full of talk about sacrifice, takes place at the very spot where a thousand years later sacrifices will be made, where burnt offerings to make atonement will be offered.

And that link gives us a further indication for what is to come. For one day, into this world comes the son of Joseph, Jesus.

But when he arrives on the scene, when John the Baptist sees him, he calls him something different. Behold the Lamb of God, he says, who has come to take away the sins of the world.



[ 36 : 42 ] this is the one who will be sacrificed, John is saying. This is the one who can make atonement. And this is not just anyone.

For famously, during his lifetime, when Jesus climbs up one mountain, he is transfigured. And that the transfiguration, a voice from heaven booms out.

this is my beloved son. Listen to him. This is the son whom God loves.

And yet, the father recognizes what must be done if blessing is indeed to come to the world, if the promises to Abraham are to be fulfilled.

And so the son of God, just like Isaac, carries the very wood on which he would be sacrificed. The son of God, just like Isaac, does not resist, but actively walks together with the father to the place of sacrifice, to the cross.

[ 37 : 58 ] And there is no alternative plan in place. There is only plan A. And so unlike Isaac, but like the ram, the son of God gives up his life on the cross, taking our place so we might live.

God, the father caught Abraham possibly to the worst trial anyone could endure. But he provided a substitute for Abraham.

And at Calvary, God, the father did indeed provide a substitute for us. But he did so by not sparing his own son, his only son.

Do you see how what Abraham has gone through here is but a foreshadowing of what God will go through for us?

The Lord will provide. for here lies the very substance of our faith. Why is it that we can say that our faith is not blind?

[ 39 : 12 ] Because God came into this very world, into human history, and through his son proved himself to be absolutely, completely, totally trustworthy. And that is verifiable because of the resurrection of Christ.

And in Romans 8 verse 32, we read this. He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

God has provided all that we need at Calvary, and he provides all that we need for today. He has met us at our point of greatest need, the need for salvation.

And so he will meet us for our every other need. If you're not a Christian, and you're listening in today, this is the good news we have.

This is the substance of our faith. And my brothers and sisters, I don't know what weather you're facing today, whether or not extreme weather is coming into your life.

[ 40 : 25 ] I don't know how the testing of your faith will come about. But I do know this. On the Mount of Crucifixion, fountains open deep and wide, through the floodgates of God's mercy, flow a vast and gracious tide, a tide of deep and meaningful grace, because the Lord has provided his son, his only son, whom he loves.

He loves. The Lord will provide. This is the good news of Genesis 22. This is the good news we have. There is no other.

This is the good news the world needs to hear. And in response to this good news, let's exercise faith, 100% faith, the way Abraham did.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.