



Lesson 14 | The Final Test

Genesis 22:1-24

We all have moments that define us. Sometimes we see these moments coming from a long way off; sometimes they come upon us unexpectedly. Sometimes they happen in front of a large crowd; sometimes they happen when we are all alone. Sometimes they happen near the end of our life; sometimes they happen near the beginning. While we will likely have several moments like these throughout our lives, often one will stand above the rest in the final analysis. Like Adam and Eve, like Israel at Kadesh-Barnea, or like Christ in the garden, we will find ourselves faced with a choice that will forever impact our lives and the lives of those around us – for good or for evil.

Abraham has faced many decision points throughout his life. Some of these have involved others, some have been between him and God alone. In some of these situations, his faith has shone. In others, he trusted his own wisdom rather than looking to God. But as we come to Genesis 22, we find what is in many ways the defining challenge that Abraham will face. God has made promises, and at long last it seems as though those promises will come to pass. Then God asks something of Abraham that makes no sense, that puts everything in jeopardy, and that requires that Abraham depend solely on what God has said rather than on his own wisdom.

What have been some of the most defining decisions in your life up until this point?

A Difficult Command (1-2)

At the end of the previous episode from Abraham's life we see the patriarch doing well. Isaac is born and growing. Abimelech is impressed by God's blessing and seeks to make a treaty. Yet rather than become proud and self-sufficient, Abraham calls out to God. Yet it is at this personal high point that the hardest test yet comes Abraham's way – God comes to Abraham and asks him to sacrifice Isaac.

The Emotional Challenge

God knew exactly what He was asking for. When asking for this sacrifice, He uses very specific language that shows He understood how hard of a test this would be for Abraham. "Your son... your only son... whom you love... Isaac." God is here asking for the thing that Abraham loves the most on the earth, the thing that means the most to him, the son he waited 100 years for.

Why do you think God asked Abraham to kill what he most loved on the earth?

Abraham faced a unique challenge since we have no record of God asking for human sacrifices anywhere else in Scripture. But we do see that God will sometimes ask for things of His children that are incredibly heard emotionally. Sometimes God will take away or withhold the thing on earth we love the most, to see if the thing we love the most is from earth. God wants to see if Abraham loves God more than he loves Isaac. He wants to see if Abraham fears God more than he fears losing his son.

The Faith Challenge

But as difficult as it would be for anyone to do what was asked of Abraham, there is an added dimension with Abraham. It wasn't just that he loved Abraham, although he certainly did. Isaac was the supposed to be the one through whom God would fulfill all His promises. The author of Hebrews points out this deeply uncomfortable truth – all of God's promises are resting on this one boy, whom Abraham is now told to kill (Hebrews 11:17-18). If Abraham went through with this and killed his son, what would come of all those promises that God had made? Was God still committed to doing what He had told Abraham He would do?

Why do you think God asked Abraham to kill the one through whom the promises were to be fulfilled?

An Obedient Response (3-10)

After verse one, we might wonder what kind of story we are about to read. Will it be the story of someone asked to do something incredibly hard, who wavers back and forth and, in the end, does the right thing? Will it be the story of another Jonah, running from God because they don't want to do something hard? It doesn't take very long to see that this story will not be anything like that, rather, this will be the story of someone who immediately obeys without any reservation.

Abraham's Preparations (3)

What details does the passage include about Abraham's response?

Abraham obeys, and obedience is immediate and complete. He gets up early in the morning, gets the animal ready, cuts the wood, and goes to where God has told him with Isaac. We have seen this pattern with Abraham before – when God speaks Abraham immediately and completely obeys. Often we want to obey, or plan to obey, but if we don't obey right away and fully, then our good intentions can be short lived.

What are some reasons we give for delaying obedience or not obeying all the way?

Abraham's Journey (4-8)

Abraham takes the servants with him and on the third day of the journey, as they approach the place God sent Abraham, Abraham decides to go the rest of the way with just himself and Isaac. Notice what Abraham tells the servants "I and the lad will go yonder and worship... and come again to you" (Genesis 22:5). Even as Abraham walks to what seems like Isaac's death, he fully expects that they both will come back. This little statement probably stands behind the author of Hebrews explanation that Abraham

figured God could raise Isaac from the dead (Hebrews 11:19). After all, if Abraham was planning on killing his son, and was planning on returning with his son, then he must have been expecting a resurrection! Abraham functions here as an example of believing God even when we can't understand what He is doing.

What are some ways we can trust God even if we don't understand what He is doing?

In another scene on the way to the sacrifice, Isaac asks a question that must have been incredibly difficult for a loving father. "Dad, here's the wood and the fire, but where is the sacrifice?" Abraham, seemingly unable to answer the question and tell his son at this point the full plan, gives a somewhat evasive answer that ends up being far more prophetic than he realizes: God will provide a lamb. This simple explanation will come to define the experience, as the phrase "The Lord Provides" will be the name of the location (22:14).

Abraham's Sacrifice (9-10)

The story moves forward very slowly in order to build tension. Biblical stories don't include unnecessary details, yet here we get detail upon detail, slowing us down and helping us feel a little of the agony Abraham must have felt this whole time. The story as a whole has included more details than normal – Abraham preparing the wood, bringing the servants, seeing the place, leaving the servants, talking with Isaac. But in these two verses things really slow down. Abraham builds the altar, lays the wood out, binds Isaac, puts Isaac on the altar, on top of the wood of the altar, reaches out, takes a knife. Abraham has had three days to dread this moment, yet when the moment comes, he doesn't hold back but completely obeys.

Sometimes our immediate decision to obey God can wear down over time. How do you think Abraham was able to stay committed to obeying God when he had three long days to back out?

A Divine Reward (11-19)

Abraham's faith here is unparalleled. This is the hardest challenge of his life, and Abraham rises to the occasion! In this final section of the story, we see that God gives great rewards to great faith. While our faith in God must be rooted in His person and should be driven by a love for Him, God is not shy to tell us that He will reward us for our faith!

How does God reward our faith today?

Why do you think God emphasizes that faith will have a reward?

God Preserves Isaac (11-12)

The first thing we see is that God rewarded Abraham by not allowing him to sacrifice his son. What a relief this must have been to Abraham! The author of Hebrews says that Abraham "received [Isaac] back in a

figure” (Hebrews 11:19). In other words, if you think about it, Abraham did receive Isaac back from the dead figuratively speaking! Abraham was ready to trust God with the thing on earth that meant the most to him, and God responded by rewarding Abraham’s faith by giving him Isaac back.

God Prepares a Sacrifice (13-14)

One of the major themes throughout this story is that the Lord will provide. That’s the name that is given to the place, and looking at this story from a New Testament perspective God’s plan here becomes more obvious. The name of this place, Moriah (cf. 22:2), seems to be connected to the location of the later temple (cf 2 Chronicles 3:1). It was here that God provided a sacrifice as a substitute for Isaac. It was here that later generations would offer sacrifices as substitutes for their sin, and it is here that Jesus would come days before He Himself died as the substitute for all mankind. While God did not ultimately ask Abraham to sacrifice his son, one day God would sacrifice His Son as a substitute for the sins of the world.

Are there any other ways in which this story echoes God’s giving of His own Son for the sins of the world?

God Promises Blessing to Abraham (15-18)

God did not intend for Abraham to kill his son. Instead, He wanted to see what Abraham would do. Obviously, God ultimately knew beforehand what Abraham would do. Yet God decided to put Abraham to the test; He wanted Abraham to demonstrate his obedience so that all could see it. Once Abraham obeyed, God reiterated and confirmed once again His promises. Whereas earlier God had said, “I will bless you” (Genesis 12:2) and “I will make your seed as the dust of the earth” (Genesis 13:16), God now intensifies the promises. “In blessing I will bless thee” and “in multiplying I will multiply thy seed” are both English translations of a Hebrew idiom that means “I will surely bless you” and “I will surely multiply your seed.” Furthermore, Abraham is told that his seed will conquer and that through his seed all the nations will be blessed.

How does God intend to fulfill these promises to Abraham?

What blessings does God have in store for those who show faith today?

At the beginning of Abraham’s faith journey, God told him to go to a place which he would show him later and He told Abraham that if he would do that God would bless him (Genesis 12:1-3). At the end of his journey, God told Abraham to take Isaac to a place God would show him later and sacrifice his son. On both occasions, we see Abraham follow God’s commands immediately and completely. As a result, a wandering shepherd who left his home and migrated through Canaan for several decades is one of the most recognized names in the world. Abraham is claimed by the three great monotheistic religions in the world today: Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. The primary requirement of New Testament Christianity is faith in Jesus Christ, and when the writers of the New Testament went looking for the example of faith, they all found the same man – Abraham.

Now, while you will probably not be the father (or mother) of many nations, and while you probably won't have multiple world religions trace their origin to you, God does promise to bless your faith as He did Abraham's. Living a life of faith is hard, and no doubt there will be ups and downs. But the question for us as it was for Abraham is simple: when God speaks, will you fear and obey Him? Those who do will see God's grace and blessing in their life. And those who don't – which at times will be all of us – should be reminded that the Lord provides a sacrifice, the ultimate sacrifice, Jesus Christ. It is through clinging to Him in faith that we find, not only forgiveness from our sins, but the power we need to live the lives God has called us to.