

Lesson 35
The Testing of Faith
Hebrews 11:17-19

Have you ever really wanted something so badly that you would do almost anything to get it? This desire within you for this thing (whatever it might have been) was a driving passion, and until that desire was satisfied there was an emptiness in your life. It may have been a desire for an education, a house, an automobile, a job, a husband or wife, to make an athletic team, to be a cheerleader or whatever. Day after day you brought this to God, and you prayed, “Oh, God, please hear my prayer and give me this thing. If you grant me this Lord, I promise to use it for your own glory.” Then one day God answered your prayers and your emptiness was filled. What an exciting thing it was to see God grant you this most precious possession.

However, suppose after all your prayers, hard work and perhaps years of waiting for this precious possession, God were to say to you, “Give this thing back to Me. I want you to sacrifice it to me.” What would be your reaction? Would you become bitter, hard and defensive and try to talk God out of it, or would you gladly submit to the Lord knowing that whatever God requires of you is for your own good? Perhaps you would ask yourself, “Why would God do this to me? How could God who loves me and gave me this thing in love take it from me? What would be God’s motive in requiring this thing of me?”

If you can understand the tension and difficulty from such an experience, then you can understand Abraham’s feeling as he was commanded by God to make a human sacrifice of his only son, Isaac. Abraham had one of the most severe and crucial tests ever brought to a true believer and he passed the test by faith.

“By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac; and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; it was he to whom it was said, ‘IN ISAAC YOUR SEED SHALL BE CALLED.’ He considered that God is able to raise men even from the dead; from which he also received him back as a type” (Heb. 11:17-19).

To really understand Hebrews 11:17-19, we must go back to Genesis 22:1-14.

THE COMMAND OF GOD - Genesis 22:1-2

“Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham ...” -- The words “after these things” are very significant because they look back over all of Abraham’s life before he came to the place of this supreme testing. In obedience of faith, he left Ur of the Chaldees, his homeland, and he also left his friends and family to go to the promised land of Canaan. In patience of faith, Abraham wandered for decades as a homeless stranger and pilgrim in the Promised Land. God made Abraham a promise that he would have a son by Sarah his wife and from this son would come a great nation. He waited 25 long years for God to fulfill this promise, and God finally brought him Isaac, the promised son. When Isaac came into this world, Abraham was 101 years

old, but this event of offering up Isaac took place when he was approximately 130 years old. Abraham was an old man; he had struggled much but he was faithful to God.

Human reasoning might cause us to think Abraham's testings were over, but the biblical record tells us that his most serious testing from God was yet to come. God was still going to test the reality of Abraham's faith even in his later years. This dear one whom God called his "friend" was yet to experience his greatest spiritual testing.

Our greatest spiritual tests as Christians come when we are older in age and older in the Faith. As a Christian grows spiritually, harder tasks are assigned him and he is called to go through deeper waters in order to manifest the grace of God in his life and to prove that he has a living faith.

God tests His veteran believers more than new believers in Christ. In war, it is not the raw recruit, but the scarred veteran who is assigned a place in the front ranks in the battle. In the NFL it is the seasoned veterans, not the rookies, who are used in the most tense moments of a football game. It should not be strange then that the maturing Christian would receive the greater of the tests that come from God.

"... and said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.'" -- When Abraham least expected it, he experienced his greatest test. Yet, he was prepared to meet this test because he was in fellowship with his God. In the words, "Here I am," we see he was ready to submit to the will of God for his life.

When we least expect it, often God will test us. God, however, never tests a man without a reason. God always has a purpose for every test. Some people present God as a big bully in the sky, flexing His muscles to keep all His finite creatures on the straight and narrow. God is love and He is infinite wisdom, and there is always a divine design behind every testing that comes to the Christian. In Abraham's case with Isaac, he was being tested concerning the reality of his faith as to whether it was truly backed up by obedient works.

"But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, 'AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS,' and he was called the friend of God" (James 2:20-24).

"And He said, 'Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you.'" -- God commanded Abraham to offer up Isaac on the altar as a human sacrifice. Isaac was Abraham's dearest possession in life and God asked him to sacrifice him to God. Notice how God refers to Isaac, "your son, your only son, whom you love." God knew what He was asking and He hit Abraham at his Achilles' heel, and touched him at the thing dearest to his heart.

This test was two fold: 1) To determine if Abraham loved God more than Isaac; and 2) To determine whether Abraham would really believe the promise of God, for God had said that only in Isaac would this great nation come into being. **“... for through Isaac your descendants shall be named”** (Gen 21:12).

Humanly speaking, this test of Abraham’s faith does not seem fair, nor does any test that comes to believers seem fair, but tests are brought by God to glorify Himself and to strengthen the believer’s faith. As our Maker and Sovereign, God has the right to demand from us anything He pleases, for He has absolute control over us and all that we have. Whatever God requires of us, we must yield to it and gladly give up self, loved ones and possessions if necessary. Testings do come to all Christians but they are always for the Christian’s good.

“Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials; knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance (steadfastness, perseverance). And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:2-4).

“In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:6-7).

THE OBEDIENCE OF FAITH - Genesis 22:3-5

“So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him and Isaac his son; and he split wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him.” -- Abraham, without arguing with God, without offering one complaint, and without telling anyone, not even Sarah, began his journey. He was obedient to God’s word and made preparation for the sacrifice. Notice “and, and, and, and” which indicates obedient action.

It seems as though Abraham could hardly wait to see what the Lord was going to do, for he knew that Isaac was the son of promise and without him there could be no covenant. However, this was no small problem for Abraham, for he had to reconcile God’s command to sacrifice his son with God’s promise to bless the world through his son. This whole situation was against human reason for it seemed like a contradiction, and it was against natural affection, for why would God command a father to slay his son? Abraham did not know how God would solve the problem but in unquestioning faith he set out anticipating that God would have a solution to the problem at the right time.

“On the third day Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from a distance. And Abraham said to his young men, ‘Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go yonder; and we will worship and return to you.’” -- Abraham displayed fantastic faith at this point. He said that he and his son would return again to that place, but how was that possible when Isaac would be slain? At this point, Abraham did not know God’s solution to the problem, but He knew that God had to be faithful to His word.

Hebrews 11:19 gives us a tremendous insight into Abraham's thinking, for he believed that God was able to raise him from the dead if necessary. This is a great act of faith because neither Abraham nor anyone else had ever seen or heard of anyone being resurrected from the dead, but he reasoned that God could do it that way because He had to be faithful to His promise.

In the midst of his testing, Abraham believed God could do the impossible, for He is an all-powerful God. ***"With men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God"*** (Mark 10:27).

THE CONFIDENCE OF FAITH - Genesis 22:6-8

"And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son, and he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So the two of them walked on together." --Isaac was no naive teenager, for he probably was around 30 years old. He knew that something strange was happening, for he and his father were very close and shared almost everything together, but now there was a strange silence between them.

"And Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, 'My father!' And he said, 'Here I am, my son.' And he said, 'Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?' And Abraham said, 'God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.' So the two walked on together." At first there must have been much silence between the two, then Isaac asked the piercing question, "Father, where is the lamb for the offering?" While the record is silent, the next few hours, as they climbed the mountain, must have been some of the sweetest fellowship a father and a son ever had as Abraham revealed to Isaac that God had commanded him to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham assured Isaac that God would provide a lamb for the sacrifice. That took real faith on Abraham's part. Abraham was a man of faith and he knew the Lord would provide somehow. Notice how Abraham's faith had been growing. At first he thought Isaac would be resurrected but now he has confidence that God will provide a sacrifice in place of Isaac.

The conversation between Abraham and Isaac must have been something to overhear. Perhaps it went something like this: "Son, God has told me I am to slay you and offer you as a sacrifice." "Why, Dad? Have I done something wrong, have I been a disobedient son?" "Son I don't know why but God has commanded me to do it and I intend to do it." "But, Dad, don't you love me?" "Isaac, my only son, you know I love you but I love God more and I must be obedient." "Well, Dad, how can a great nation come through me if I am dead?" "Son, God is faithful and if I put you to death God will raise you up, I promise because I believe God. God must be true to His covenant. Anyway, Son, God will provide and somehow you will return with me." "Dad, I don't understand it all but I too believe in the one, true and living God, and I will be obedient even unto death." "Thank you Son, but I know God will provide. We must trust wholly in God!" At this point Abraham's faith became Isaac's faith. Abraham's faith affected Isaac so that he too had complete confidence in God.

THE SACRIFICE OF FAITH - Genesis 22:9-14

“Then they came to the place of which God had told him; and Abraham built the altar there, and arranged the wood, and bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. And Abraham stretched out his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.” -- Abraham was ready and willing to sacrifice his son in obedience to God’s command because he knew that somehow God would provide, even if He had to resurrect Isaac from the dead.

Notice carefully that God tested Abraham right up to the last moment and pushed his back to the wall before God intervened and provided a sacrifice. Abraham never faltered in faith or obedience, and we as Christians should never falter when we are tested, for God may wait until the very last moment to provide a solution to our problem.

This also took great faith on the part of Isaac. There is no record that Isaac in any way resisted his father. Why? Because he believed in God like his father. Abraham’s faith was infectious!

“But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, ‘Abraham, Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ And he said, ‘Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.’ Then Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the place of his son.” -- God provided a ram for the sacrifice.

The solution to the problem of sacrificing Isaac was right near all the time and all Abraham had to do was trust God to provide. When we as Christians are tested by God, we must trust God right up to the end, and then we will find that God has a very simple solution to the problem.

“And Abraham called the name of that place, The Lord Will Provide, as it is said to - this day, ‘In the mount of the LORD it will be “provided.”’ -- Abraham learned just as every Christian must learn that in every physical, emotional and spiritual test, the Lord will provide.

Hebrews 11:19 says, ***“He considered that God is able to raise men even from the dead; from which he also received him back as a type (figuratively speaking).”*** Isaac, to the mind and will of Abraham was as good as dead. For all practical purposes, Abraham received Isaac back from the dead. Figuratively speaking, Abraham received his son through a spiritual resurrection.

APPLICATIONS

Abraham’s test was concerning his most precious possession, Isaac. God tested Abraham in this area to prove the reality of his faith. Every Christian has his Isaacs; that is, some precious possession that God will one day test and ask the Christian to give it back to Him. When this happens to you, Christian, will you meet the test? Will you trust God in what seems to you to be a contradiction between the divine promise and the divine command? Will you trust God to solve a problem that is humanly irreconcilable to your finite, limited mind?

God may test you in relation to yourself, and you must understand by faith what seems to be a human contradiction. The Bible teaches that if you give up self to God, you gain life. ***“For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; and whoever loses his life for***

My sake and the gospel's shall save it (Mark 8:35).

God might test you in the area of your children as He did Abraham, and you must learn to turn your children over to God in order to keep them. ***“He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me”*** (Matt. 10:37-38).

God may test you as a single person who wants a wife or husband. You may want a mate desperately but God will test you to see if you love Him more than anyone else in the world. You may have to make the decision to not marry an unbeliever. ***“Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light and darkness?”*** (2 Cor. 6:14)

God may test you in the area of prestige and popularity. He may ask you to give up friends and associates for God's glory and to prove your devotion to God. When by faith you obey, God will provide more abundantly for you. ***“And He (Christ) said to them, ‘Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children (or friends), for the sake of the kingdom of God, who shall not receive many times as much at this time and in the age to come, eternal life’”*** (Luke 18:29-30).

God may test you in the sphere of material possessions, and ask you to give them up or be willing to give them up for Him. ***“So therefore, no one of you can be My disciple who does not give up all his own possessions”*** (Luke 14:33).

Now I ask you again, “How will you react if God tests you concerning your most precious possession? Will you say, ‘Lord, your will be done and I know you will provide,’ or will you panic and fall apart at the seams?” True faith is always convinced that God is on the throne and that God will provide a solution to the pressing problem whatever it might be.

CONCLUSION

For you without Christ, you who have no personal relationship with God through Christ, you who have never had your sins forgiven and been granted eternal life, you who have never been born from above by God's Spirit, God will also provide for you. You can become a child of God if you will by faith trust in Jesus Christ to save you.

You must change your mind about your sin and turn to Christ. Christ has provided a perfect salvation for all who will trust in Him. Trust the Savior, for He is your only hope to solve the greatest problem of all - the sin problem that separates you from God. Believe in Christ and you will find the Lord does provide.