

Abraham: Tested by God, Then Sarah's Death

Genesis 22-23

Focus Verse

"Abraham answered, 'God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.' And the two of them went on together." – Genesis 22:8

- Abraham Offers Isaac as a Test of Faith – Genesis 22
- Abraham Buries Sarah in an Expression of Faith – Genesis 23

Engage

Your deepest loves represent the most vulnerable space in your heart. The people and dreams you treasure most bring both your greatest joys and deepest sorrows. Enduring love and intimate fellowship with your closest relationships including your spouse, children, parents, grandparents, siblings and friends bring some of life's greatest satisfaction. We often set our sights on achievements, marriage or other dreams. Your personal identity can even be tied to your relationships and aspirations. But anyone who has lost a loved one through death or a broken relationship or has seen a dream die has experienced profound pain and loss. What we love most, we hate most to lose. What if God calls you to let go of someone you love or your hopes for the future? Faith in God requires trusting Him with precious relationships and desires we think will bring us the greatest fulfillment. True fulfillment is found in loving and trusting God. Do you find it challenging to fully trust God with what you love the most?

In this lesson, Abraham faced two tests that revealed the strength of his faith in God. Both tests touched his deepest loves. Both tests revealed God's faithfulness and strengthened Abraham's faith. God commanded him to offer the son he deeply loved back to Him. Isaac was not just his son, he represented his "dream," the promise of God. Then he faced the death of Sarah, his beloved wife. We have traveled with Abraham through his life and watched his faith grow. The tests of his faith in these chapters are intensely personal. **God our Father knows exactly how to test us for growth and how to save us through grace.** When your faith is tested, do you hold tightly to God and loosely to everything else?

Abraham Offers Isaac as a Test of Faith – Genesis 22

God Speaks – 22:1-2

God's test of Abraham in this chapter is **extreme, even unthinkable**. "Take your son, your only son, whom you love – Isaac – and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you." That God *would* ask this and that Abraham *could* obey shocks us.

Verse 1 clearly indicates "God tested Abraham." In this context, "test" means "to prove by trial." Why would God's test involve human sacrifice? **We must grapple with the unbelievable horror of this request.** God imposed a test on Abraham that took him to his breaking point – the offering of his only son. The command of God put His promise, which depended on Isaac, at risk. The "why" behind Genesis 22 stretches us beyond human understanding, to say the least.

God did not test Abraham to gain information He lacked about Abraham's faith. **God tested Abraham so Abraham would know what God already knew – that Abraham was willing to offer God what he loved most.** As humans, our love for God must exceed all other loves. God never tempts anyone to do evil. This test revealed Abraham's deep faith, love and hope more than any previous experience.

God's request to Abraham was that he offer his son as a "burnt offering," an atoning sacrifice for sin. The horror of this intentionally reminds us of something Abraham did not know. **Many years later, God, the heavenly Father, offered His one and only Son as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world.** Isaiah 53:10 says, "Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and

prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.” For Jesus, there was no ram in the thicket to spare Him the death He did not deserve. He was the willing substitute, offered by the Father for us. This scene in Genesis 22 helps that sobering reality settle deep within us. So perhaps the shock of this passage can progress to profound worship at God’s amazing and sacrificial love for undeserving sinners.

Abraham knew the one true God. He called on the name of the Lord, and the Lord called on him. **When Abraham received this unique command directly from God, he did not question God.** We are wise to ask ourselves at this point in Abraham’s life, “What did Abraham know about God?” and “What did Abraham know about Isaac?”

What did Abraham know about God?

Abraham knew the eternal God could be trusted. He had walked with God who had proven His faithfulness through many years and overwhelming challenges. Abraham understood that God kept His promises. Hebrews 11:17-19 best explains what Abraham believed at this moment, “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, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.” When God called his name, Abraham immediately replied, “Here I am.” Other faithful servants such as Moses, Samuel, Isaiah and Ananias used this same or a similar unreserved response to God’s call.¹

What did Abraham know about Isaac?

Abraham knew Isaac represented God’s hope for the world (Genesis 21:12). God miraculously provided Isaac by His power alone. Abraham knew He loved Isaac deeply. All God’s promises and purposes for Abraham were wrapped up in Isaac. Abraham knew that God’s covenant promises did not apply to Ishmael, his son through Hagar. This is why God reckoned Abraham as having one son, “your only son.”

What was God’s Purpose?

God’s purpose in this test was for the benefit of humanity.

- **God’s test benefited Abraham.** God already knew the quality of Abraham’s love for Him, but Abraham needed to know himself that he loved God above all others.
- **God’s test benefits all believers who inherit His promises to Abraham.**
- **God’s test ultimately benefits all people.** Through Abraham’s faith, God provided a physical preview of the substitutionary, sacrificial death and resurrection of the Son of promise, Jesus Christ.

Abraham Obeys – 22:3-10

Prompt obedience – 22:3-5

Abraham immediately and deliberately obeyed God’s command. As in chapter 21, when God counseled Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away, the Scripture records no verbal response, but that he obeyed “early the next morning.” Abraham himself prepared the things needed for the trip, rather than rely on his servants. He loaded the donkey and cut all the wood. Abraham prevented any room for disobedience through lack of preparation or for excuses later. He set out, just as God commanded.

Abraham traveled for three days, with no indication of second thoughts or compromise. Imagine his thoughts and prayers as they traveled. **Abraham trusted God as he moved forward in costly obedience.** They arrived in the region of Mount Moriah, or present-day Jerusalem. Seeing their destination in the distance, Abraham told his servants to stay with the donkey while he and Isaac went further. Abraham declared he and Isaac would worship and both would return. He knew God’s character and that God keeps His promises.

Painful test – 22:6-10

Abraham moved forward with his son, the wood, fire and the knife. Unlike the pictures in some children’s Bibles, Isaac was not a small child but a young man. Some clues regarding his age emerge from the passage: Sarah’s age at his birth and her death (90 and 127); his weaning celebration, likely between the ages of 2 and 12; and the passing of time (Genesis 21:34 and 22:1). Like the Lord Jesus Christ who carried His own cross, Isaac carried the wood for his sacrifice.

The conversation while Abraham and Isaac walked reveals the tenderness of their father-son relationship and Abraham’s trust in God. Even though God had not yet given the ceremonial laws to Moses that governed the worship of His people, Isaac knew and asked about an appropriate burnt offering. He asked his father, “Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” We feel the love of Abraham, not only for his son but also for God, as he faithfully declared, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.”

The passage clearly conveys Isaac’s compliance, and we can only imagine his thoughts as the scene unfolded. Isaac was undoubtedly far stronger as a young man than his elderly father. **Abraham could not have offered Isaac to God if he had refused to participate.** Abraham bound Isaac, laid his son on the altar and raised the knife. Abraham offered Isaac to God as an act of worship and obedience. Isaac trusted his father, and his surrender to this situation indicates he also trusted God. Both father and son obeyed and consecrated themselves to God. In the same way, Christ was one with His Father when He “gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”²

Abraham proved to God, himself, angels, demons and to future generations that he loved and trusted God fully. He allowed nothing, not even his only son, to divide his affections from wholehearted union with God. He completed the test by faithful obedience to God; he surrendered completely. **God's goal appears to be evidence of Abraham's surrender, not the sacrifice of Isaac.**

God Provides – 22:11-14

Suddenly, Abraham heard “the angel of the LORD” call from heaven. Again, Abraham immediately responded, “Here I am.” The Old Testament title “the angel of the LORD” is commonly understood to identify the second person of the Trinity, God the Son, Christ Himself, before He came to earth as a human. **God gave new instructions, “Do not lay a hand on the boy,” and again Abraham obeyed immediately.** Surely Abraham welcomed this instruction with great relief.

Now, just as Abraham told Isaac, God Himself provided the ram for the burnt offering, an appropriate animal to take Isaac's place. Abraham and Isaac could not have appreciated the symbolic picture this account gives of the greatest substitute and sacrifice of all time. God's provision of grace here pictures the gift of His Son. Every sinner who receives Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior accepts His substitutionary death for their personal debt of sin. Isaac's question of “Where is the lamb?” was answered for the last time almost 2,000 years later by John the Baptist, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”³

In Genesis and throughout the Bible, significant events or new revelation from God were often commemorated by changes to the names of people and places. Abraham called this place Jehovah Jireh – “The LORD will provide.” **Abraham experienced God's provision that day in an extremely personal way, but his statement also foreshadows God's provision far beyond that day.** Nearly 1,000 years later, Abraham's descendant King David purchased this land in Jerusalem for an altar to the Lord. His son, King Solomon, built God's temple on the same site. The temple was destroyed in 586 B.C. then rebuilt and known as Herod's temple by Jesus' day. Jesus stood in its courts, declared himself Son of God and said, “Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.”⁴

God's Commendation and Confirmation – 22:15-19

The “angel of the LORD” called to Abraham from heaven a second time. God's commendation clearly confirmed what He intended for Abraham. “I swear by

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myself, declares the Lord, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore.” Abraham needed to know the depth of his own consecration to the Lord. God touched and tested the most tender place in his heart, asking him to sacrifice the life of his own son. **As your perfect Father, He knows exactly how best to test and grow your faith in Him for His purposes.** When God requires a new step of faith, are you ready to follow Him?

The Lord swore on His own perfect character to fulfill His promise. He would bless and multiply Abraham's descendants beyond measure. They would possess the cities in the land. They would bless all nations on the earth. Hebrews 6:13-19 explains God “swears by Himself” because there is “no one greater for Him to swear by;” God did this “to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear” to Abraham and all who believe.

God's covenant with Abraham was unconditional. Yet God commended Abraham's faithful obedience by further declaration of the solidarity of His promises. **Abraham exercised his faith and learned that his love for God and for Isaac was deeper than he ever imagined.** Abraham, Isaac and the servants returned to Beersheba, more aware than ever of the faithfulness of God.

Imagine the father-son talk on the trip back from the mountain of sacrifice. Relationships within our families offer perhaps our greatest opportunities to live out our faith. Isaac clearly had been impacted by Abraham's living example of trust in God. Those closest to us often see the best and worst of us, but recognizing our witness not just to the world, but also to our families, is important! Never underestimate the impact of daily life and conversations. **God's people recognize their own responsibility to live out faith in daily life.**

Nahor's Family Lines – 22:20-24

“Some time later,” Abraham received news about his family while living at Beersheba. A brief list of the descendants of his brother Nahor is included here. In chapter 24, Abraham sends a servant to find a bride for Isaac from among his brother Nahor's family. **Bethuel and his daughter Rebekah are significant in God's plan for Isaac.**

The Doctrine of Substitution

The richness and beauty of salvation in Christ cannot be adequately captured in a few words or a single concept. Scripture layers many important doctrines to help us understand the wonder of salvation. **Substitution is one of the main salvation concepts in the Bible.** *Huper*, the chief Greek term expressing this principle, means “on behalf of” or “in another’s place.” The concept of someone taking someone else’s place is not hard to understand. We see “substitutes” in many realms of life – substitute teachers, substitutions in team sports. The thought carries into the spiritual realm; sinful humans need a righteous substitute.

The Old Testament foreshadows the ultimate substitute, Jesus Christ. God established substitution in the Garden of Eden where innocent animals died to provide coverings for sinful Adam and Eve. Obedient Abraham offered Isaac, and God provided a ram as a substitute. The Passover observance that began before Israel’s exodus from Egypt substituted an unblemished lamb to save the firstborn of each family from death (Exodus 12). The sacrificial system established under Moses carried the concept of substitution forward as well. Jesus Christ died as the ultimate substitute for sinful people – the Lamb of God (Isaiah 53:6; Romans 3:25; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 2:17; 10:1-17; Revelation 13:8). He stood in our place and bore the full force of the wrath of God for transgressions past, present and future, once and for all. As a result, forgiven sinners stand before God covered by the righteousness of Christ. This gift is received by grace, through faith and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Without Jesus as my substitute, I must carry the guilt and burden of my own sin. Nothing within any human can perfectly satisfy God’s righteous standards. My best efforts will never be good enough. Without Jesus standing in my place, I live without hope in this life and face the just penalty of my sin for all eternity. Without Jesus, all I have left is “me,” which will never be good enough.

Thankfully, Jesus provides what I cannot. He takes my place, receiving the just punishment my sin deserves. **In a glorious, wonderful exchange, Jesus substitutes His righteousness for my sin.** His resurrection power becomes mine as I, though dead in my sins, am made alive spiritually through Him. When God looks at me, He does not see my sin, He sees Jesus. Only God’s unconditional, inexhaustible love can explain why Jesus would be my substitute. And for the love that made Jesus take my place, I will forever praise Him!

Abraham Buries Sarah in an Expression of Faith – Genesis 23

Abraham Mourned Sarah’s Death – 23:1-2

Sarah died in the land of promise at the age of 127. Isaac was born to Sarah when she was 90. He was nearly 40 years old at the time of her death. The Old Testament records people’s age at their death to signify honor. Sarah is the only woman whose age at death is recorded in Scripture, and she is mentioned more often than any other woman. As the mother of God’s promised son to Abraham, Isaac – the heir of the covenant, she is an ancestress of Christ Himself. Her life bears enduring importance in Israel’s history and our understanding of faith, and the New Testament commends her faith.⁵

Abraham and Sarah both struggled and grew together in their walk of faith. **Abraham wept and mourned her death, but not without hope.** She and Abraham displayed the companionship and close affection of marriage between two believers. Each

sinned against the other, but they also forgave one another. Her son, Isaac, missed her greatly and was only comforted when he married Rebekah.

Abraham Buried His Beloved Wife – 23:3-20

Abraham actively expressed his faith in God’s promises as he buried Sarah. Abraham’s purchase of the burial ground from the Hittites (tribe from Canaan’s son Heth) proved he believed God’s promises. He buried his beloved wife in the land God promised him and his descendants.

Abraham approached his neighbors with graciousness and humility. He asked the Hittites to purchase a burial plot for Sarah saying, “I am a foreigner and stranger.” He believed by faith God had given him the land, but did not demand or take the land by military force. The Hittites honored his presence among them and offered their best tombs. Instead,

Abraham asked for their help to negotiate a sale for the cave in the field of Machpelah near Mamre. Abraham insisted on paying a fair price for the field, cave and land that was deeded to him. He staked his claim in the land that was his by God's promise.

Abraham's journey through life proved God can be trusted and is worthy of unwavering obedience.

God's command to sacrifice his precious son stretched and tested his faith. God's provision of a substitute reinforced God's faithfulness. Abraham buried Sarah and intentionally purchased the first piece of ground to officially belong to God's people. Abraham dealt honorably with his neighbors because he trusted God. Abraham's faith was more than wishful thinking. He believed God and acted on that belief.

Abraham walked with God through the course of his life, trusting God more with each step. Even when he faltered, he experienced God's grace and got back in step with God's plan. **God, your Father, knows exactly how to test you for growth and how to save you through grace.** Abraham's story does not elevate himself. Abraham's story exalts God, the primary character.

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Take to Heart

Hold Fast

Chapter 22 paints a picture of God's love. In fact, Genesis 22:2 is the first time the word love is used in the Bible. **Isaac's willing obedience to Abraham's God-ordained plan pictures the eternal love between Father and Son.** The Lord Jesus, out of love for His Father and love for sinners, "humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross."⁶ Isaac willingly obeyed his father and offered himself as a willing sacrifice. Jesus said, "The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life – only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord ... This command I received from my Father."⁷ Christ was "chosen before the creation of the world" to be the "lamb without blemish."⁸ He died in your place for your sins because of His great love for you.⁹ Love for Christ should motivate our own obedience.

God had specific purposes in His covenant relationship with Abraham. He prepared Abraham for this greatest test of his faith through previous experiences: the call to leave home, to separate

from Lot, to persevere in faith until Isaac was born and to send away Ishmael. Abraham's immediate obedience was the right response when God called him to give back the most precious gift, his and Sarah's son, Isaac. Abraham continued to prove his trust in God's promises as he purchased a burial plot for Sarah. **Abraham's walk with God offered many opportunities to trust God and prove Him faithful.**

Abraham depended on what He knew about God and about Isaac. God was perfect, all-powerful and good. Isaac was the instrument of God's promises for the world. **Abraham depended on everything gleaned from his relationship with God to believe God could even bring Isaac back from the dead.**¹⁰ When God provided the ram to substitute for Isaac, Abraham might have felt as if he had received Isaac back from the dead. God's test of Abraham produced through faith a picture of resurrection through the power of God's loving provisions of grace, justice and mercy.

Apply It

Abraham journeyed with God through life, growing in faith with every challenge and phase of life. **Every life stage and phase will bring its own brand of challenges that build faith.**

As you journey through life, your trust in God can sometimes have strings attached. Is it easy to trust God when things go your way? Trusting God is easy when your bank account is adequate, your family is thriving and life is generally good. But to trust God when it is costly is another matter entirely. What are your unique faith challenges at this stage of your life? How is God using your life journey to deepen your trust in Him? How does reflecting on God's past faithfulness strengthen your faith? How will you trust God as you step forward where you have never been before?

God not only nurtured Abraham's faith, he tested it.

Faith is a gift of God that must grow and develop. As sinful humans, we often fail to trust God until we need to trust God. Without tests of our faith, we do not fully experience God's faithfulness. We choose to trust God until doing so proves difficult. Unless you know how desperately you need God, human understanding and solutions still look appealing. **Abraham needed to know he trusted God more than he loved his son.**

Abraham needed to experience that when he held nothing back from God, God held nothing back from him. What situation are you facing that is testing the depth and quality of your faith? What are you learning about God? What are you learning about yourself? What do you love and trust more than God? Tested faith proves that God's promises are not just words, but reality.

God loves you in the deepest way possible. **It is no surprise that God's deepest work within you will touch who and what you love most in this world.**

Your trust in God goes the deepest when you trust Him with the people and dreams that have a hold on your heart. Abraham's highest dreams and deepest love rested on Isaac. Sarah, his loving partner in life and companion in his faith journey, died. He had to apply his faith and trust God with losing what he loved. How do you know if your loyalty and love for God has an unhealthy rival? How has your own faith development touched your "Isaac" or taken away your "Sarah"? God did not hold back His hand from striking His own Son, a sacrifice of love to save you. God can be trusted with everything, especially what you value the most.

Go Deeper

Check out these footnoted references for further study of God's Word in this week's lesson.

- 1: **Here I am:** Exodus 3:4; 1 Samuel 3:4; Isaiah 6:8; Acts 9:10
- 2: **Sacrifice:** Ephesians 5:2
- 3: **Lamb of God:** John 1:29
- 4: **My day:** Deuteronomy 12:14; 2 Samuel 24:10-25; 2 Chronicles 3:1; Daniel 9:27; John 8:56
- 5: **Sarah's faith:** Hebrews 11:11-13; 1 Peter 3:3-6
- 6: **Obedience to death:** Philippians 2:8
- 7: **Lay down life:** John 10:17-18
- 8: **Perfect lamb:** 1 Peter 1:18-20
- 9: **Love of God:** John 3:16-18; 13:1; Romans 5:8; 1 John 4:19
- 10: **Living sacrifice:** Hebrews 11:17-19