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The Test

Genesis 22:1-24

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At the end of Genesis 21 we saw Abraham planting a tamarisk tree, a symbol of cosmic stability, and worshipping God—specifically calling on *el olām*, on the God Who Endures, on God Everlasting. He had just been through three events, each of them making God’s covenant promises more sure: the birth of his promised son, Isaac; God’s provision for Ishmael; and finally his ownership of a piece of the promised land. Abraham saw the God of the universe, the great creator, providentially working to bring his great plans to fruit. Abraham saw God Everlasting, the God of covenant promises, at work in his own life and worshipped him.

Now in Chapter 22 Abraham gets a different perspective on God. Look at verse 1:

After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.”

Literally, the Hebrew says “the God tested Abraham”—*that* God, the *same* God who is sovereign over his Creation, and who has proved his covenant faithfulness now comes to put that covenant in jeopardy with a test. And so he calls to Abraham, and Abraham, who has learned to trust in God Everlasting, answers: “Here I am. I’m ready. How can I follow you today, God?” He’s ready to follow, walking by faith, but what God asks of him will come as a shock.

[God] 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 of which I shall tell you.” (Genesis 22:2)

That’s *not* what Abraham expected when he answered, “Here I am.” Abraham has learned to walk by faith with the God who keeps his promises and he’s learned to walk by faith precisely because God has demonstrated over and over to Abraham that he keeps his promises. But now God comes to him saying, “Abraham, I kept my promise to give you a son; now I want you to give him up.”

Needless to say, this is one of the most heart-wrenching stories in the entire Bible and one of the most perplexing. Why would God do this? Remember, this is a test. We can understand better what’s going on when we think about the nature of a test. When I was an undergraduate I had a church history professor whose test-writing strategy was to make his tests so hard that no one could possibly get every answer correct. This let him grade on a curve and gave him a more accurate measure of how well the class was learning. Needless to say, many of his students didn’t like his strategy; they wanted easier tests. But easy tests don’t push students to study hard and learn the material. God’s tests are often difficult for just this reason. Easy living and easy choices don’t build strong faith and easy tests of faith don’t really prove whether we’re truly willing to follow God. When we look at God’s tests in the Bible we see God testing people to the limit. Think of poor Job, losing his entire family except for his nagging wife, and then sitting on an ash heap, scraping his open sores with a potsherd, while his friends berate him for sins he hadn’t committed. Think of the little nation of Judah, sandwiched between the great empires and with great armies on her doorstep ready to trample over her. And yet in all of these circumstances God says to his people: “Trust me. Walk with me. Let me take care of you. Do not compromise. Sin not.”

As modern people what usually strikes us first here is the element of child sacrifice. For Abraham the idea that his God would require a child sacrifice wasn’t as shocking as it is for us. Child sacrifice was not uncommon in his world. Fertility gods would often require the sacrifice of the firstborn of

the livestock and sometimes even firstborn sons as offerings to guarantee future fertility. We see this same principle carried over in the rest of Scripture. The Israelites made offerings of the firstborn of their livestock. As a perpetual remembrance of the Passover, they were also required to offer their firstborn sons at the altar, but were *also* required to redeem their sons with a substitute offering. So for Abraham, the idea of sacrificing his son to the God who had provided him in the first place would have been logical in any other circumstances. The issue for Abraham here is that God had made a promise that he would be the father of a great nation and that Isaac was the son through whom that promise would come about. Now God seems to be revoking that promise by requiring the sacrifice of Isaac. The timing is just right for the test. There’s no falling back on Ishmael; he’s been gone, probably for at least ten or fifteen years. And Abraham’s now at least 110 years old. The birth of Isaac was a miracle not likely to be repeated. This is a profound test of Abraham’s faith. What’s remarkable is that, regardless of his emotional state, Abraham does not hesitate to do what God has asked.

So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. (Genesis 22:3-4)

Abraham got up early the next morning and went to work. It’s interesting that the last thing he does is chop wood for the fire, *after* organising his servants for the journey and getting the donkey ready. Some people have seen this as a sign that Abraham was distraught and not thinking clearly. It might simply be that he didn’t want Isaac or Sarah suspecting what he was up to. Whatever the case, he and Isaac, along with two servants, make the three-day journey to Moriah. Imagine what was going through Abraham’s head for those three days: three days to doubt, three days to question, three days to fear, three days during which he could have backed out

at any time. Abraham could have done it quickly, creeping up to Isaac that very night and slitting his throat while he slept—like ripping off a Band-Aid. But no, those three days were part of the test. God allowed for enough time to be sure that Abraham was truly committed. Abraham's obedience isn't an unthinking reaction, it's a *decision*.

When they get to the mountain, we see that Abraham still has his mind made up. In fact, in his instructions to his two servants we see his faith in God. Look at verses 5 and 6:

Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you." 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 they went both of them together.

Despite what God has called him to do, Abraham seems to be sure that he'll be returning down the mountain with Isaac. The text focuses on Abraham; it doesn't tell us much about Isaac. We often think of Isaac as an innocent and unquestioning little boy, totally oblivious to his father's plans. And yet we read that Abraham loaded him down with the wood for the sacrifice. This isn't a little bundle of sticks. A human sacrifice would require a good bit of wood, which suggests that Isaac is by this point a strapping young man capable of carrying it. Isaac isn't ignorant or stupid. Here he is carrying the wood for a sacrifice as his father walks beside him with a knife and flint. He's putting two and two together.

And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together. (Genesis 22:7-8)

We can only imagine the amount of grief and pain behind Abraham's answer

to Isaac. He knew what God required of him, and yet still he speaks in faith: one way or another God has provided and will provide—it's God's nature to do so. If Isaac is the "lamb", God has already provided him and will continue to provide in accordance with his promises. If God does not truly intend for him to go through with the sacrifice of Isaac, Abraham trusts that God will provide an alternative. We don't know exactly what he's thinking; he probably wasn't sure himself what would happen. But Abraham *was* certain the God who had promised would provide in such a way that his promises would be fulfilled. Abraham was willing to walk with God, following him in faith, and trusting him to work out the details. The Hebrew word used here for "provide" is also the word for "see". As we've seen throughout Genesis, from the very beginning, God never sees without providing and what he provides is *always* good—always the perfect thing to meet the need he sees. Again, it's his nature and because it's his nature to provide what is good we can trust him in every situation, no matter what.

When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son. (Genesis 22:9-10)

What was going through Abraham's mind as he and Isaac gathered stones and built the altar. Abraham was still resolved to do as God had asked. It's at this point we also see the trust of Isaac. He may have wondered what his father's plan was as they climbed the mountain with nothing to sacrifice, but now we're told that Abraham bound him and placed him on the altar they'd built. Again, remember, this isn't a little boy oblivious to what his father is doing. This is a young man old enough and strong enough to carry the wood for his own sacrifice. It's a young man intelligent enough to question his father about the lack of an animal for the sacrifice. And now that young man allows his father to bind him and lay

him on the altar. Consider that Abraham was at least 110 years old. Isaac could have overcome him at any time. This is the evidence that Abraham has truly raised his son as a child of the covenant. Isaac does not bear God's circumcision in vain; Abraham has taught him the faith—taught him to walk with God in trusting obedience. Prefiguring Jesus, Isaac offers himself as a willing sacrifice, trusting in the goodness of God. And trusting God to the end, Abraham raises the knife. That's when God speaks again.

But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." (Genesis 22:11)

I imagine Abraham choked on his desperate response, maybe even wondering if the Lord's voice were his imagination. "Yes! Lord, if it's really you, *here I am!* You're servant is ready and listening!"

He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called the name of that place, "The LORD will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided." (Genesis 22:14)

Imagine the relief with which Abraham put down that knife and set his son free. Imagine the thankfulness with which Abraham sacrificed the ram that God had provided to take the place of his son. God has been providing for Abraham all these years, but here at Moriah, on the Mountain of Seeing, Abraham worships and give thanks for the first time to *yahweh yireh*, to the LORD Who Provides. But calling on God as the LORD Who Provides is more than an acknowledgement of God's provision; if we understand the religious background of Abraham's people we

can see that it's a profound expression of the growth of his faith and his understanding of God. Through testing God has not only expanded Abraham's faith, but also his knowledge of him. "The LORD Who Provides" contrasts with the name we saw at the end of the last chapter, "God Everlasting".

Remember that in the ancient Near East people worshipped many gods. There were "big" gods who created the cosmos and oversaw the course of history—like the Canaanite god, *El*—and there were "little" gods, who took care of families and clans, villages and cities. Most people acknowledge the "big" gods, but most of their worship was directed to the "little" gods who took care of everyday life. What we see here is that the Lord is beginning to fulfil both these roles for Abraham. The Lord is *el ôlām*, "God Everlasting", who holds the destiny of nations in his hands, but the Lord is also *yahweh yireh*, "Yahweh Who Provides"—a "big" god who isn't too big to stoop down and provide for the most basic needs of his people. This was a big step for Abraham with his pagan background, but it's also important for us. How many people do we know who acknowledge the reality of a Creator, but are convinced that the Creator could never have the time or interest to be involved in their lives? The God of Abraham demonstrates that he's a God who is bigger than those "big" gods of the pagans. He's big enough to hold the cosmos in his hand and still take a personal interest in the life and well-being of every one of his creatures.

In response to Abraham's demonstration of faith, God once again proclaims his covenant. And as God has done before with each new revelation of his covenant, he makes the details of its fulfilment more specific. Look at verses 15 to 19:

And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven and said, "By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your

offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice." So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba. And Abraham lived at Beersheba.

First, this time God swears the oath in his own name. He hasn't done this before. Whenever we read in the Old Testament about "the land that I swore to Abraham" it's this oath that those passages refer to. This oath represents a dramatic "firming up" of God's already iron-clad covenant promises. But for the first time God now also gives a specific hint as to how Abraham's descendants—now to be as numerous as the sand of the seashore—will possess the land: they will possess the gate of their enemies. This is a reference to conquest. This part of God's promise was especially important for the Jews, first hearing this as they camped below Mt. Sinai. God was calling them to an invasion of Canaan and this part of the promise should have been an encouragement to them when their spies came back with warnings of giants who guarded the land. God promised that they would possess the gate of their enemies, but instead of trusting his covenant promise, they doubted God and spent forty years wandering in the desert because of that doubt. This covenant declaration should have been all they needed to be reassured of their victory.

The story ends with Abraham returning home with Isaac and his two servants. I'm sure the trip home was considerably more joyful than the trip to Moriah. That said, the story isn't quite over. Chapter 22 ends with a short epilogue that, at first glance, doesn't seem to have anything to do with the story we've been following. Look at verses 20 to 24:

Now after these things it was told to Abraham, "Behold, Milcah also has borne children to your brother Nahor: Uz his firstborn, Buz his brother, Kemuel the father of Aram,

Chesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph, and Bethuel." (Bethuel fathered Rebekah.) These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham's brother. Moreover, his concubine, whose name was Reumah, bore Tebah, Gaham, Tahash, and Maacah.

Why are Abraham's nephews and nieces important? Most of these names are unimportant to our story, but notice Rebekah. Abraham reminds us that we worship the LORD Who Provides—the Creator who isn't too busy to take an active role in the lives of his creatures. Isaac has just been confirmed as the child of God's promise, the one through whom the covenant will come about. And yet this means that Isaac will himself have to bear sons through whom God will bring about his promises. The story is only just beginning. Isaac still has some years to grow up, but in the meantime the storyteller draws our attention over the mountains and across the desert to that distant land of Haran where we see God already preparing to provide a bride for Isaac. God is at work everywhere. Our focus right now is on Abraham and Isaac, but God is way ahead of us and is already providing to meet the next need. Life is full of twists and turns, but God is always preparing our safe arrival around the corner. There was a well of water in the wilderness ready for Hagar, there was a ram already caught by the horns in the bushes atop Moriah, and there was already a bride for Isaac awaiting that future marriage day.

Before we can leave the story of Abraham's test we have to ask "Why?" It was a test of faith, and yet God already knew what Abraham would do. Why put him through the trauma? We might as well ask why God calls us to pray and to worship. He knows what's in our hearts before the words of a song ever make it to our lips. He knows best and has already established his plans long before we pray. It's not as though we pray and God suddenly thinks, "Oh! I'd never thought of that. I sure am glad that Bill said that prayer; his plan is so much better than mine." We might as well ask why God tests us at all in life. Why challenge us with problem people,

with financial woes, or with the loss of a loved one if God already knows how strong our faith is, how strong our trust in him is? Brothers and sisters, the answer lies in the fact that God is gloried as we demonstrate our faith through life's ups and downs. We give him glory when we proclaim out loud the feelings of thanks and praise in our hearts. We give him glory when we declare our trust by praying out loud "Thy will be done". And we give him glory when we endure trials and tribulations by trusting in him before the eyes of a watching world. And it's as much for us as it is for God. These opportunities to trust give feet to our faith. It's one thing to know how to do something in theory, it's another thing to actually do it—to put it into practice. The more opportunities we have to exercise faith the stronger our faith will grow and the deeper our knowledge of God will become. Just look at Abraham: after each of these tests he praises some new aspect of God that he'd come to know through the testing.

This test was particularly important. Consider that every other time God tested Abraham, asking him to give something up, God had promised something better in return. Abraham came through every test more blessed in material ways. But that raises the question: Was Abraham only following God because of the blessing he received in return? Was Abraham in this for Abraham's glory or for God's glory? This time there's no better thing promised in return; God simply calls Abraham to sacrifice the whole covenant. His promises hinge on Isaac, but God asks Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. God is looking for a strong faith in Abraham, the kind of faith we see in Job when he declares to his friends, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him" (Job 13:15).

Brothers and sisters, is that the kind of faith that God sees in us? Do we demonstrate strong faith in our own trials? Do we have faith to trust that even though we can't see around the corner, God is preparing something good for us? Do we have the faith to trust that God truly does know what's

good for us, even when his good so often means letting go of our skewed idea of "good"? Do we trust him through trials, through pain, through suffering, through loss, through hardship, and even through death, knowing that even if every earthly pleasure is taken from us, we still have reason to declare that God is good because he offers us his very self that we might have eternal life with him? Brothers and sisters, God is most glorified when, in the depths of the pit, we can declare: God is enough. God is most glorified when he asks us to give up everything and we still trust in his goodness as Abraham did.

If God didn't care about our growth in faith, he'd simply save us and take us to heaven. Instead he leaves us here that we might glorify him by growing in our knowledge and trust of him. Too often our only focus is on our destination. We expect a smooth ride from here into the New Jerusalem. But, brothers and sisters, smooth rides don't teach us to trust God. Life with God is often more like a roller coaster. It's up and it's down and sometimes it's even upside-down. We learn that we're out of control. And yet people—not *me*, but many people—enjoy roller coasters precisely because of the thrill of being out of control. It's a thrilling experience, not a fearful experience, because they know that well-qualified engineers built and maintain the track. You may not be in control as a rider, you may not know what's around the next bend or on the other side of the upside-down loop, but you know that someone else is in control and you trust them to keep you safe—and so you enjoy the ride. Life with God is often like that, and as he takes us through the turns and loops, we gradually learn to trust him to bring us through safely. And consider that the more we learn this lesson, the more we learn to trust, the less reason we have to fear or be anxious about what's around the corner. As we trust in God to get us safely to our final destination, we can thrill in the journey he has given us along the way, even through all the ups and downs. And as we trust him to provide what is good, we give him his due glory.

Let us pray: God Everlasting and Lord Provider, we give you praise that you see our needs and provide good things to meet every one of them. Give us faith, we pray, to trust you in all things and to follow you all our lives, that we might glorify you by our faith and demonstrate your faithfulness to the world. We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.