

Foundations: Abraham III—THE TEST **Genesis 22:1-8 (AFBC 7/30/17)**

Sometimes life is full of surprises—complete with laughter and joy. Last Sunday, we considered Abraham and Sarah’s big surprise—when God told them they would have a son in their old age.

They laughed—at first, because it seemed too good to be true; and then they laughed again as they welcomed their little Isaac into the world. Isaac means “laughter.” Old Abraham and Sarah found out that God’s wonderful surprises could fill their lives with laughter.

But sometimes God takes a different approach. He confronts us with situations that we would have in no way chosen for ourselves—yet, it’s something we need to face—perhaps to firm-up our relationship with God, or to discover how truly dependent we are on Him.

A little girl was asked in Sunday School, “Who made you?” “Well, God made part of me,” she answered.

“What do you mean,” the teacher asked, “that God made part of you?”

“Well,” she said, “God made me real little, and I just ‘growed’ the rest myself.”

In our relationship with the Lord, we don’t do very well at growing ourselves. We need help; and sometimes God allows us to face situations or He actually orchestrates our lives in such a way as to test our faith and commitment to Him. These testing times are intended to be times of growth.

In the Scripture before us today, Abraham faces the greatest test of his life. There had been other tests, of course. Two weeks ago, we considered the call of Abraham.

God told Abraham to leave his country and his people and his father’s household in order to go to an unknown land that God would show him. In essence, Abraham was asked to give up his *past*. That was a tremendous test for Abraham—and he passed.

But that test must have seemed small compared with the test we read about today. Now it seemed that Abraham was being asked to give up his... *future*:

“Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about” (Genesis 22:2).

This was God’s command to Abraham and, with it, the joy and laughter left him. The old patriarch must have felt that all the sadness in the world had been crammed into his heart.

God does test us at times; and, in these moments, we may feel as though we’ll never laugh again. In this remarkable story, however, we learn how to not only face, but also pass the tests God puts before us. And we discover the results when we do.

I. The first step in facing and passing God’s test is **BEING AVAILABLE WHEN WE WISH GOD WOULD ASK SOMEONE ELSE** (verse 1). God called him by name: “Abraham.” And Abraham replied, “Here I am.”

God was about to ask Abraham to do the unthinkable; but Abraham still made himself available to God. Through his actions, he demonstrated his desire to obey God.

But this would test him beyond what most of us could imagine. I say this realizing that many people struggle with the notion of God testing us. It doesn’t quite fit with their picture of who God is.

They have what we might call an “easy chair” image of God. He exists in order to be there when they need Him and He’s always around to support them in the most comforting ways possible.

The problem is that they don’t realize that God is far more concerned with how committed we are *to* Him than how comfortable we are *in* Him.

And so, He puts us to the test at times so that we will know and grow in this relationship. The tough times are growing times.

Nature itself teaches us this. Take, for instance, the birth process. Birth usually involves a struggle, but scientists who study these things tell us the struggle is often necessary for survival.

People are fascinated by how giraffes give birth. The mother giraffe—who’s very tall--remains standing the whole time. The head and front hooves of the baby giraffe emerge first.

When enough of the weight of the newborn is outside the mother, that little giraffe drops ten feet to the ground and lands on his back—welcome to the world! (You may know someone who shows signs of having been born this way.)

The mother giraffe lowers her head and takes a quick look at her little one. Then, summoning all of her maternal instincts, she kicks him... kicks him with enough force to knock him head over heels.

When he doesn't get up, she kicks him again...and again... until finally the little giraffe gets the message and tries to stand.

It's a tough struggle. The baby giraffe gets tired, so the mother kicks him another time so he'll try harder. Finally, the little fellow stands for the very first time.

As he stands there on wobbly legs (baby dear legs, Amy!), the mother does a remarkable thing. She knocks him down! Why? Because she wants him to remember how he got up!

Out in the wild, you see, baby giraffes must be able to get up quickly to stay with the herd where there's safety. Lions, leopards, and hyenas all like to have little giraffes for dinner; and they will unless that young giraffe is able to get up and move.

Could it be that God allows us to be knocked down and sometimes even sees to it himself... because He knows that life can be like a jungle—that Satan and sin are like ravenous wolves—so you and I need to know how to stand and move out of harm's way?

I believe so. It's not what we would choose for ourselves; and we may feel like saying to God, "Go pick on somebody else;" and yet, as a good and loving Father, God is doing for us precisely what we need.

Abraham made himself available to God even when everything within him wanted to resist and run the other way. Staying available was the first step in meeting God's test.

II. The next step, once we have made ourselves available to God, is **BEING OBEDIENT WHEN WE DON'T UNDERSTAND WHAT GOD IS DOING** (verses 2-4). Do you think for one minute that Abraham had any inkling as to what God was up to?

God told him to go and sacrifice his son. He asked Abraham to give what he most wanted not to give. Yet verse 3 says that "Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey, got a couple of servants and his son Isaac, cut enough wood for the burnt offering, and set out for the place God had told him about."

He didn't know why. Abraham's obedience was an act of faith—in this case, radical faith! Being obedient when we're "in the dark" as to what is going on... is a tough test for any of us.

Sometimes we get so caught up in trying to find every answer to every question, demanding that we have them all before we proceed, that we fail the test of faith.

I admire people who don't allow their handicap to be any more of a hindrance than it absolutely has to be. While visiting with Claire in New York, we decided to travel up the Connecticut coastline.

We stopped at a seafood restaurant located on an inlet. There were lots of boats docked close by—we could see them from our table. After we finished eating, I went outside to get a closer look.

There was an older fellow standing on the dock, checking on his boat. We got into a conversation. He told me he had just spent several days at a camp for children with disabilities. He was excited about it, so I asked him to tell me more.

He said his job at the camp was to teach these children how to sail. "It's not easy to sail a boat," he said. "We had to carry these children on board and then secure their wheelchairs so they wouldn't get tossed around by the waves. A lot of them didn't think they could do it."

Then he smiled real big and said, "But you know what? They did it. They learned how to sail those boats—and what a thrill it was to see it happen!"

When it comes to living our lives, we all have disabilities of some kind. We all need to listen for God's instructions if we're to live our lives well, and accomplish what we should.

There may well be times when we don't know why we're going through something, or we feel that God is requiring too much, or asking us to do what we don't think we're capable of doing. Still, God wants us to obey Him even when we don't fully understand.

III. A third crucial step in the midst of such testing is **BEING CONFIDENT WHEN WE MUST RELY ON GOD COMPLETELY** (verses 5-8). In spite of his anguish, Abraham had a confidence that came from relying on God rather than himself.

Abraham, Isaac, and their servants had traveled for three days. They were now close to the place for the sacrifice.

In verse 5, Abraham tells the servants to stay put while he and Isaac continue a ways further. Then he adds, "We will worship and then we will come back to you." Notice: *WE* will come back to you.

Abraham knew where they were going and what they were to do when they got there. The knife was strapped to his side. The son whom he loved so dearly would be its victim.

But Abraham also knew God's promise to him that through Isaac he would be the father of a great nation. Could Abraham understand this? No. How could he possibly understand?

To fulfill God's promise, Isaac must have children; but God had instructed Abraham to offer his boy—his one and only--as a sacrifice. If Isaac was sacrificed, how could he ever have children? It made no sense. It was humanly impossible.

Yet, Abraham was confident. He was certain that God would keep his promise... somehow; and he believed that when he came down off the mountain of sacrifice, Isaac would be with him: 'We will come back to you,' he said.

Perhaps Abraham was thinking that even if his son had to die, it would provide God with another opportunity to work a miracle. Abraham was not confident in himself or in his own understanding of the situation, but He was confident in God.

When we left Claire in New York, we went to D.C. to visit Katie. There was a folk arts festival set up on the national mall. The circus was being featured, and trapeze artists were inviting members of the audience to try it out. (Pam wouldn't let me.)

A few folks did rather well--others didn't! Fortunately, though, there was a net. That net beneath the performers actually serves two purposes. The first, of course, is to catch them if they fall.

The second purpose--one we often overlook--is to help them *avoid* falling. Without the net, you see, they would be so concerned about falling, they would be far more likely to do so.

The net allows them greater freedom to do their best. In the same way, relying on God and His undergirding strength gives us the confidence to attempt great things and to be our best.

Can you imagine what Abraham was feeling when his son asked **"Father, the fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" (verse 7)**

But now listen to Abraham's confident reply—a byproduct of his trust in the Lord. Abraham said, **"God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son."**

That's faith—confident faith: "God will provide." So Abraham passed his test. Now, in closing, let's consider the result.

IV. The result of being available to God, obedient to His will, and confident in His abilities is **BEING BLESSED WHEN WE HAVE PASSED THE TEST THAT GOD GAVE US** (vs 9-19).

Verse 9 tells us that Abraham 'built an altar, arranged the wood, bound his son, and laid him on top of the altar.'" He took the knife and raised it above his head to carry out the sacrifice.

Then came the voice, the just-in-the-nick-of-time voice, the wonderfully blessed voice of God, saying, "Abraham, Abraham, don't lay a hand on the boy.

The test is over, Abraham. You were willing to give to Me even what you most wanted not to give—your son, your only son.

"A+, Abraham. You pass... with flying colors."

Then God continues, "Now just listen to how I'm going to bless you. Your descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore.

They will overcome their enemies and possess their cities. Because of your obedience, Abraham, not only will you and your family be blessed, but people all over the world will be blessed through your offspring."

Friends, if we know the Lord and are seeking to follow Him, there will be times of testing. These will involve circumstances we would prefer to avoid, for this is the nature of God's tests.

We do well to accept these times when they come, while looking forward to what God will accomplish in our lives through them.

It's not easy to obey God when we don't understand what He's doing. It's hard to be confident when we are so completely at His mercy.

Abraham's story teaches us that when we face the tests God puts before us—when we pass them by remaining faithful—being obedient and confident in God's strength--His blessings follow.

In those moments, though—in the middle of the test--we may feel that all the joy and laughter has left our lives forever. But just as He did with Abraham, God makes sure the joy returns.

It did for Abraham. By God's grace and because of His great love for us, the joy and laughter will return to our lives as well.

We can count on it, because this is the kind of God He is—a God who was willing to give up *His* only Son for us.

As we close our service this morning, you have the opportunity to respond to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob... the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

He wants you to know how much He loves you. He wants you to understand that even the sadness and hardship that comes your way can result in something good—and will, for His children.

He wants all of us to know that we can trust Him and count on Him in every moment of life. He wants to bless our lives beyond all measure. So, friend, put your faith in Him. Today—trust Him!