Messages From Genesis

“The Test”

Abraham’s son Isaac had grown into a son any father could be proud of – respectful, obedient. Isaac was born when Abraham and Sarah were well beyond the child-bearing years – born even though Sarah up to that point had been infertile. Because he was to them “God’s miracle child”, Abraham gave his heart completely to the boy.

Sometimes Abraham would take Isaac up to a high spot and show him the tents and servants and flocks of animals that were Abraham’s. He’d point to the land as far as they could see – surveying the expansive property in every direction. “When I die,” Abraham would say, “I’ll give you all of this. You’ll get the land too. But remember, the land will be God’s gift to you, as He promised.” The bond between the old man and his young son was as deep and tender as any father-son tie could be.

Abraham would never forget that fateful day God spoke to him: *Abraham! Take your son Isaac to a mount in Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering to me.* Abraham lay awake most of that night. Occasionally he would go out of his tent and stare up at the sky, gazing at the stars, and wonder, "Why?"

Early in the morning he got up, cut some wood, then saddled a donkey. He asked two servants to accompany him on a journey he was about to make. Then he entered Sarah’s side of the tent and touched his son to waken him. “Come,” he whispered. “Don’t disturb your mother. Come.” So they slipped out as morning dawned and began a three day journey. On the third day Abraham looked ahead and saw the place of sacrifice in the distance. He said to the servants, “Wait here. The boy and I will go ahead and worship the Lord and then come back to you.”

Abraham took the wood and laid it on the back of his son. In his left hand he bore fire, in his right hand a knife, as they walked together toward Moriah. At one point Isaac said, “Father?” “Yes, son.” “We have the fire and the wood for our sacrifice, but where’s the lamb?” “Ah, the lamb,” Abraham replied. He paused before continuing. “The lamb…God will provide.” They kept walking, climbing the side of Moriah together.

When they came to the appointed place, Abraham stooped, and built an altar. Silent, deep in thought, the wiry old man placed the wood on the altar. Then he bound Isaac, hoisted him up and laid him on the altar also. He tried not to look at the absolute terror spreading across his son's face.

He tied his robe to his waist so that nothing on the garment hung loose. With his left hand he touched his son’s breastbone; then with his right hand he picked up a long copper knife and raised it high so that he could kill the boy with a single thrust. *Abraham! Abraham!* It was the Lord calling. *Abraham!* “Yes, I’m here!” the old man cried out. *Stop! Don’t hurt the boy! I know now that you fear Me, since you did not withhold your only son from me!*

Relieved, but shaken, Abraham looked around and saw a ram caught in a thicket by his horns. So he went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. And he

called the name of that place *The Lord Shall Provide*. And there on the spot, God reiterated what He had promised Abraham years before, *“I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore…and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me”* (Genesis 22:17-18).

This is one of the great stories of the Bible! Yet it reads like a horror film! *Offering a boy as a human sacrifice?* If a parent today said God told him or her to kill their son, then burn the child as an offering to God, we'd say that parent is deeply disturbed, even insane. If a parent actually *did that* to a son or daughter, that parent would be charged with murder.

This story is a reminder of how different Biblical culture was from modern day life! In Old Testament times some pagan religions included human sacrifice. For instance, in 2 Kings 3 it says this about the king of Moab: “When the king of Moab saw that the battle had gone against him…he took his firstborn son, who was to succeed him as king, and offered him as a sacrifice on the city wall” (2 Kings 3:26-27).

Because Biblical culture, Hebrew culture, was so different from modern western culture, this presents a challenge in our interpretation of Bible. God always works and reveals Himself *within the context of the customs and the culture of the time.* So, when we come across stories like this, we have to ask: What was it saying to the people of *that day*, within that culture and time frame? And then ask, how do we interpret this for *our time and our lives*?

It's important to note that nowhere else in the Bible does God approve of child sacrifice. It's forbidden. It's an abomination. But God steps out of that mode this one time - to test Abraham!

If we can move beyond feeling repulsed by this story, or wondering how God could ask Abraham to do such a monstrous thing, this ancient story is a remarkable example of *one man’s ability and willingness to trust and obey God!*

Think of it: It was Abraham’s *only child*. Born when Abraham and Sarah were way too old to have kids! Born so God’s promises that Abraham would have numerous descendants could come true. And now Abraham is to take the knife and sink it into his son and end his life! And *God’s promises go down the drain!* And on top of that, the grief it would cause Abraham, and Sarah, to lose their only child! And yet Abraham is willing to do it! I mean, you talk about pushing a person’s religious faith to the limit!

It's interesting what the Book of Hebrews says about this event. It's found in chapter 11, where some of the Old Testament "greats" are memorialized: "By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son,of whom he had been told, 'It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you.' He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back" (Hebrews 11:17-19). Apparently, Abraham must have thought that even if

he killed Isaac, God would bring the boy back to life!

Do you think God tests people today? I've had people who've gone through a rough time, or

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some kind of misfortune, say to me, "I think God is testing me." Maybe you’ve thought that, at times. I don’t have any problem believing that sometimes God does test us. However, I think we need to be careful here!

For instance, if I lose my temper and curse out my boss, or punch my boss and lose my job, I can hardly say God’s testing me because I’ve lost my job! Sometimes we go through difficult things in life as a result of our own bad choices or foolish mistakes. Let’s not blame God for some of the dumb things we do! Or, suppose a family member - a husband or wife, a child, a sister or brother, develops a serious or fatal illness, and you think, "God is testing my faith because

this person I love so much is so sick, or has died", it may test your faith. But I don't think God *made that person sick* just to test you! Sometimes bad things happen, and it’s a real time of testing – but it’s not like God is orchestrating the whole thing, and making others suffer just to test us!

*On other hand, I think there are times when God may be actively intervening in what happens in order to test our faith.* Maybe we've been praying for something, and the answer doesn't come right away, or maybe not at all. Or we have our house up for sale, the contract has been drawn up, then the buyer backs out. And it really creates a very difficult situation for us.Or we plan to drive to an event that we've been so looking forward to, and on the way our car breaks down, and we wind up missing the event.Yes, God *allows* these things to happen. But maybe even God is *arranging and ordering* these things just for the purpose to try us and test us.I believe Scripture bears out the truth that God at times puts His children to the test.

Why? What is God’s purpose in it? What’s He up to? Scripture helps us helps us out here! For one thing, *God tests us to see what’s really in our hearts.* The Israelites wandered around in the desert for 40 years. As that difficult time is about to end and they are perched and ready to enter the Promised Land of Canaan, Moses reflects on that experience. “Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you *in order to know* *what was in your heart*, whether or not you would keep his commands” (Deuteronomy 8:2). Notice: “to humble you” “to test you to know what was in your heart”.

Some Christians aren’t what they appear to be. Some may appear mature in Christ – but a difficulty arises, and they're ready to sell God down the river. "So much for this 'God is good stuff!'" Other Christians may not be flashy or showy – but they go through a really bad

experience, and somehow they don’t waver. They’re still able to be thankful, still trust that God is good, still love God with all their heart. Times of testing may serve as a mirror that we can look into our own heart, and see how much of the Lord is really there!

*Also, God tests us in order to increase our endurance.* James 1:2-4 says this: "My brothers and sisters, think of the various tests you encounter as occasions for joy. After all, you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. Let this endurance complete its work so that you may be fully mature, complete, and lacking in nothing."Notice, we are to be *joyful* when we face times of testing. Why? Because the testing of our faith can produce endurance…perseverance.

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Life can be tough, right? Bad things happen. There are roadblocks we face. Life requires

patience, perseverance. “Perseverance” “endurance” - aren’t words we like! We want God to *fix things.* And do it *quickly,* Lord! But mature people, seasoned Christians, are able to face life with patience, and persevere through all of the ups and downs of living. And the tests we face in life can firm us up and condition us for the long haul, to quietly trust God in good times and in bad times. And Scripture says endurance will "complete its work" in us (James 1:4) so we can be mature and complete in Christ, not lacking anything!

God tests us to see what’s in our hearts; to make us stronger that we can face life with endurance and perseverance. One more thing: *God tests us to prepare us for greater service.* Mark Batterson is the lead pastor of National Community Church in Washington, D.C. - an author, and one of the most creative church leaders of our time. In his book *Draw the Circle,* he describes how his congregation was involved in a prayer challenge where the church gathered for prayer every morning. He says, "Like clockwork, we hit our knees at 7:14 a.m. sharp." It became such a routine, he says, that it became second nature to him.

One day he had to miss the prayer meeting because of an early morning flight to Cleveland. As he got off the plane he realized that it was time to pray. Listen to what he writes about what happened next. "As I got off the plane, I realized it was time to pray. I knew I’d be kneeling at our coffeehouse, but I was in the middle of an airport. And that’s when I felt the Holy Spirit throwing down the gauntlet, impressing on me the need to kneel right then and there. To be honest, I resisted: 'But, Lord, I’m in the middle of the Cleveland airport.' The Lord said, 'I know exactly where you are. Gate D8.'

"At first I rationalized not kneeling. *'I don’t want to feed negative stereotypes about religious fanatics. I can pray just as effectively as I walk toward baggage claim. I can kneel a little later in the privacy of my hotel room.'*  While all of these things are true, I knew it wasn’t the point. I knew the Lord was testing me to see if I’d be willing to obey Him whenever, wherever, whatever. I knew that if I failed this test, I would be standing in God’s way of using me in bigger ways. I wanted to prove to Him that I cared more about what He thought than about what people thought. I wanted to prove to Him that I belong to Him everywhere, all the time. And I knew that if God could trust me with the little things, then He could use me to do big things. So after looking both ways down the terminal, I hit my knees at Gate D8. It was one small step in the long journey toward complete consecration. A little piece of my ego died that day at Gate D8."

Notice, he said, "I knew that if God could trust me with the little things, then He could use me to do big things." Sometimes God may prompt us to do things that seem silly, or outlandish, as a test. For Abraham, it was offering his son as a sacrifice. For Mark Batterson, it was kneeling for prayer in the middle of a busy airport. But, when God tests us, and we come through, God opens up larger opportunities for us to serve Him! God doesn’t test us to toy with us. He tests us because He loves us – we’re His children. He tests us to see whether we will trust Him…and obey Him…and be available for even greater service.

Oh, by the way. About 1800 years later a well-known Father had to wrestle with whether or not to sacrifice His Son. And in this case, the sacrifice, the Son’s death, *did take place*! No stopping the killing at the last minute. The Son’s name was Jesus.