

## “A Father’s Greatest Gift” (Genesis 22:1-24)

How many of you have prepared your last will and testament? What types of things will you leave behind: a house, a car, a business, a generous sum of money, and various possessions? How important do you think these things are? What difference will any of these things make in eternity? I would like to talk to the men in our congregation about living out and leaving behind the greatest gift a father can give. That gift is a legacy of obedience. Although I will be directing my focus to men, my hope is that all of the women will listen in and see the relevance of this sermon. We will be looking at one of the greatest chapters in the entire Bible. Please turn with me to Genesis 22. This chapter tells us about a great man with a great faith who encountered a great crisis. His crisis was a crisis of obedience. This chapter is structured in four flowing segments.

**1. The test of obedience (22:1-8).** Our passage begins with the phrase, “**Now it came about after these things,<sup>1</sup> that God<sup>2</sup> tested<sup>3</sup> Abraham.**” The phrase “**after these things**” looks back over Abraham’s pilgrimage of faith. During these years, Abraham encountered several tests; some he passed and others he failed. Abraham was quite human, like you and me. Yet, despite a mixture of success and failure, God sought to mature Abraham and use his life powerfully.<sup>4</sup> Maybe you have had your share of success, but you’ve also experienced some failure along the way. You need to know today that God has not discarded you. He’s not finished with you yet. In fact, He wants to take you to your next spiritual level. He does this through tests.

The word “test” still conjures up nightmares for me: burning the midnight oil to memorize volumes of facts; noticing my increased heart rate as the instructor passed out the test; staring into space and trying to remember a name or a date. We have all been through the stress of tests.<sup>5</sup> Yet, it is easy to assume that tests only take place in school. How wrong we are! The real tests take place in the course of our lives. In these tests, whether we pass or fail is of the utmost importance.

We must keep two things in mind here. First, there is a vast difference between how God tests a person and how Satan tests a person. God does it to confirm and strengthen. Satan does it to corrupt and weaken. In the New Testament, James lets us know that God was testing Abraham so his faith could be made perfect before men (Jas 2:22). The word “perfect” means complete or mature. Persevering through tests and being obedient to God made Abraham’s faith visible to an on looking world. God tested Abraham in order to give him an opportunity to display his true character.<sup>6</sup> He will do the same for you. Every test God brings into your life is an opportunity for you to shine and advance to another spiritual grade level. This ought to excite you. Even if spiritual tests are difficult, they have a wonderful purpose: to make us more like Christ so the world can see God’s greatness revealed in us.

Second, we need to be aware that Abraham had walked with God for about 35 years before God tested him in this most severe way.<sup>7</sup> God did not give him this severe test until He knew Abraham was ready for it. One of the great things about God is that He does not give us tests that we cannot pass. His tests come when we are prepared. On top of that, He supplies an extra measure of grace to help us through times of testing. God is not like some of our former teachers who tested and gave us premature pop quizzes on information they had never covered in lectures. He is gracious and faithful. He wants for us to receive the highest grade possible!

So we are told from the very first verse that Abraham will be tested in this chapter. Notice in 22:1 when God calls Abraham’s name, he responds with, “**Here I am**” (cf. 22:11). Abraham was willing to hear from God and be moved to action. Howard Hendricks, the great Christian writer and teacher, likes to say that great leaders must be “F.A.T.”: faithful, available, and teachable. Men, do those characteristics define who you are? Obedience and discipleship demand that you be a man who is FAT.

The Lord speaks again in 22:2: **“Take now your son,<sup>8</sup> your only son, whom you love, Isaac,<sup>9</sup> and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains<sup>10</sup> of which I will tell you.”** This verse is not made up of a series of gracious requests. Instead, God gives three blood-curdling commands (“take,” “go,” and “offer”). To make matters worse, God doesn’t even give an explanation; He just gives an instruction. Abraham was not simply to wound his son and then nurse him back to health.<sup>11</sup> He was to offer his son as a burnt offering. Can you feel this man’s pain? It must have been horrific!

Shortly after our first child, Joshua was born, as his father; I dedicated him to the Lord. I’ll never forget that moment. I had just finished getting him ready for bed when the Lord impressed upon me that he did not belong to me. Little Joshua was lying on his back on our changing table and I got down on my knees and acknowledged to the Lord that Joshua was His. I told the Lord that He could have His sovereign way with him. Now, I love Joshua with all that is within me, but I told the Lord He could take him from me at any time if that was in accordance with His perfect will. I pray that will not be the case, but Joshua is not mine. He is not Lori’s. He belongs to God and God alone! You see, it’s one thing to say, “The Lord blessed me with a child,” but the question is, what do you say when the Lord asks for your child back? Life is merely on loan to us, both as parents and as children. God can ask for its return at any time. Fathers and grandfathers, are you living with this realization? Are you making the most of the days God gives you with those who matter most to you? The greatest gift a father can give his children is a legacy of obedience.

In 22:3-4, we see that when God’s test came, Abraham obeyed God immediately, radically, totally, and unquestioningly. Abraham got up early. Now, if I had been Abraham, I would have spent at least a day or two praying and fasting. I would have sought the best pastoral counseling available. But not Abraham, he obeyed! Scripture does not say, but I suspect his decision to get up early may have had more to do with torment than eagerness. Notice Abraham saddled his own donkey and also split his own wood. This is a man who is over 100 years old and has numerous servants. What was he thinking? My guess is he was probably trying to occupy his mind with activity so he wouldn’t have to think about what lie ahead. Yet, in spite of all of this, he could not finish the deed quickly; he was given time to think about what lay ahead. It was a three-day journey from Beersheba to Moriah<sup>12</sup> (50-60 miles). This was all a part of the test of obedience.

Do you work out through some means of physical exercise? Why do you do this? Like most people, you probably work out to lose weight and stay in shape. Think back to when you first began working out. Did you like it? Did it feel good? Did you see immediate results? If you’re like me, the answer to all of these questions is a resounding “no!” In fact, during the first few weeks most people who begin working out will feel very weak and tired. The secret is perseverance. Over the long haul, exercise does produce better physical conditioning.

Men, the same principle applies to obedience. It is not always fun and/or comfortable. Obedience requires persistence and perseverance but over the long haul, it has good results.<sup>13</sup> All of you work hard at something: your job, your finances, your hobby, and your entertainment. Are you willing to work as hard at obeying God as you are these other temporal pursuits? If so, you will see great results.

In 22:5-8, we see that Abraham’s obedience was based on faith. After seeing the dreaded destination, Abraham spoke. He instructed his servants to stay behind with his donkey. Abraham probably did this because his servants may have tried to restrain him from carrying out his awful deed. Don’t miss the last phrase in 22:5: **“we will worship and return to you.”** God told me to go kill my son, but we are coming back.<sup>14</sup> Abraham was prepared to kill Isaac, burn his body as an offering, and then watch God raise him up, off the altar. Why? Because he believed God was able. Now I’m sure he must have been praying his heart out, but he was obedient in the midst of great anguish.

This statement is rather remarkable when you realize that God's command was illogical. From every human viewpoint it was contradictory and inconsistent. God had promised Abraham He would establish His covenant with Isaac. And it was to be "an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him" (17:19). So at the ripe old age of 100, Abraham became a father and now God wants to take his son. This doesn't make sense. Yet, Abraham was obedient and did what contradicted logic (Heb 11:17-19).

There will be times in your life when obedience will not make sense. Are you prepared to obey Him even in these cases? The greatest gift a Father can give his children is a legacy of obedience.

Abraham's test intensifies in 22:7: Isaac finally breaks the silence and speaks. You see, as they were trekking along, Isaac didn't realize he was the lamb. Finally, it dawned on him that the most important element was missing. So he said to his dad, "**Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?**" Who can imagine what went through Abraham's mind when Isaac asked that? What could he say? "You're it! I'm going to sacrifice you." Rather, Abraham replied, "**God will provide**" (22:8). Not only did his response shroud the truth from his son, it also demonstrated faith in God. What he was saying is, "Let's let God take care of it." I want to come to the place in my own life where I can confidently say, "God is big enough to take care of me." If I'm faithful to obey Him in all He asks of me, He will provide for me all that I need.

How can we pull off this kind of obedience? By saturating ourselves in God's Word. This is not as difficult as many men think. Are you willing to get up a few minutes earlier and spend time in God's Word? Are you willing to listen to the Bible during your commute? Will you read the Bible to your children after dinner or before you put them to bed? Can you memorize a Bible verse a week? Maybe you'd like to form a small men's group? The possibilities are endless.

[Abraham passed the test of obedience, but now we come to...]

**2. The commitment of obedience (22:9-12).** In 22:9-10, we see that Abraham's obedience was thorough and complete. The whole procedure is drawn out like a slow-motion replay. It has taken three days to get to Moriah. Once Abraham finally arrives, he has to climb Mount Moriah. Then he has to build the altar, arrange the wood, bind his son, lay him on the altar, stretch out his hand, and take the knife to slay his son.

Now, on my best spiritual day, I probably would have had faith to build the altar, but not to kill. Abraham did everything yet heaven remained silent. I'm sure as he raised that knife, every bone in his body must have wanted to disobey. But if Abraham had not raised the knife he would not have heard from God. Did you catch that? It took raising the knife of obedience, with intent to kill (that's commitment)...and then Abraham heard from God.

At this point in our story, it is often our tendency to object to God's demands. We wonder why God wants such sacrifice from us. We may ask ourselves, why does He want all of me? Well, let me try to put this into perspective. Husbands, is it inappropriate for your wife to want all of you? Is it wrong or unfair for her to not want to share you with other women? How much more so with our heavenly Father? He wants all of you!<sup>15</sup> Remember, total obedience is not only measured by what you give God; God also takes into account what you keep for yourself. Can God get close to the most important things in your life: your possessions, business, plans and dreams, and relationships? Are you willing to let go? Luke 14:26-27 states the demands of discipleship: "If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple."

Sometimes the supreme test of our faith will be a matter of putting obedience to God above something we have lived for all of our lives. Sometimes it will involve something that might, to everyone else, seem foolish and ridiculous.<sup>16</sup> Men, are you willing to be sacrificially obedient to God in every area of your life? Today, will you commit to being a man of character? Will you remain above board in your ethical dealings at work and at home? Will you be a man of purity? Will you be a man who is involved in ministry? Will you prioritize your greatest ministry in life—your marriage? Will you reaffirm today that you will honor the vows you made before God and man: that you will remain married to your wife for better or for worse?

[We've looked at the test and the commitment of obedience. Now our story shifts gears and transitions into...]

**3. The provision of obedience (22:13-14).** When Abraham demonstrated that he was willing to go all the way with radical obedience to God, the Lord provided a solution to his crisis.<sup>17</sup> Remember, God was testing Abraham (cf. 22:1). He didn't want the sacrifice of a son; He wanted the surrender of a father. Fittingly, Abraham named this place **"The Lord will provide"** (*Yahweh Jireh*). The name he chooses does not draw attention to himself but to his Lord. He does not name the place "Abraham was obedient." He focuses on God's mercy and faithfulness, not on his own obedience.<sup>18</sup> Abraham wanted there to be a record for Isaac. Abraham wouldn't have any problem trusting God again.

What you release to God, He replaces with something even more valuable. Do you believe that?

[But our story gets even better. Not only did God grant the provision of obedience, He also honors Abraham with...]

**4. The blessing of obedience (22:15-24).** The final point of this passage is that obedience is rewarded. It is rewarded in three ways. First, there is a fresh word from God. We are not told whether or not God spoke to Abraham during his three-day journey to the mountain. But once he arrived and was performing the sacrifice, God spoke commanding Abraham to stay his hand and then again to give a word of promise. In 22:15-18, we have the final recorded instance of God speaking to Abraham.<sup>19</sup> It is a good word. It is as though He told Abraham, "Well done, good and faithful servant...enter into the joy of your master" (Matt 25:21).<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting, it is **"the angel of the Lord"** (the preincarnate Christ) who speaks to Abraham. As it will be at the Judgment Seat of Christ, Jesus commends Abraham.

The second way Abraham's obedience is rewarded is by the promise these final verses contain. In substance they are not much different from what has gone before,<sup>21</sup> but several features are added. To the promise of offspring as numerous as **"the stars of the heavens"** (22:17), God now adds that these offspring shall be as numerous as **"the sand which is on the seashore."** His descendants would also occupy the city gates of their enemies. This means God will give Abraham the ability to face his enemies and ultimately conquer them. These statements intensify God's promise. God also swears by Himself in giving this testimony (cf. Heb 6:13-14). It would seem from these statements that the supreme act of obedience on Abraham's part drew forth the supreme promise of blessing from God.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, the angel of the Lord says **"And in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice"** (22:18). God promised Abraham children and grandchildren who would grow up to love and obey God.<sup>23</sup> In 22:20-24, our narrative closes with the happy news that Abraham's brother Nahor had become the father of 12 sons. They would later become the ancestors of 12 Aramean tribes. The central purpose of this list is to introduce the future bride of Isaac, Rebekah (22:23). Most of the other names in this genealogy are the ancestors of cities and tribes around Israel. They are precisely the peoples who are to be blessed through Abraham's offspring. What a privilege God gave to Abraham...to be a blessing upon others.

Abraham obeyed God fully. Through his act of obedience, Abraham could now be called the “friend of God,” not only by God Himself, but also by men (2 Chron 20:7; Isa 41:8). This is in fact the name by which Abraham has been known down through the centuries in many lands and by at least three religions (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam). Had Abraham not obeyed God in the greatest test of his life, he would have still been justified by faith, but by allowing that faith to be alive in his works, he attained a mature faith which was recognized by men.

Men, did you know God wants you to be significant? He does. Yet, He wants you to find your significance in Him and Him alone. You see, the great thing about the blessing of obedience is you don't forget what God has done for you and God doesn't forget what you've done for Him. He is no man's debtor! In the eternal future when God reveals the will and inheritance He has prepared for you, you'll see the value of your obedience. You'll realize on that day that the greatest gift you can give your children and loved ones is a legacy of obedience.

Romans 8:32: “He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?”

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Five times in his pilgrimage of faith, God came to Abraham to make a request that must have severely tried his faith. First, God called Abraham to leave his country and family and go to a land He would show him (12:1). In the very next chapter, it was necessary for Abraham to separate from his nephew Lot who was probably more like a son to him (13:1-18). Later in chapter 17, Abraham administered the sign of the covenant, circumcision, on himself and his whole household. Abraham circumcised himself when he was 99 years old. Now that's faith! A fourth great crisis involved the casting out of Ishmael who for 13 years was thought to be the promised seed of Abraham (21:14). The fifth and greatest crisis is found in chapter 22.

<sup>2</sup> The term "God" (*Elohim*) includes the definite article ("the God," Gen 6:2; 27:28; 31:11; 46:3; 48:15). This is a way of indicating that the true God is making these demands.

<sup>3</sup> Such testing shows what someone is really like, and it usually involves difficulty or hardship (cf. Exod 15:25; 16:4; 20:20; Deut 8:2, 16; 13:3; Judg 2:22; 3:1, 14; 1 Kgs 10:1; Dan 1:12, 14). This is the first time the verb (but not the idea) "test" (*nsh*) occurs in the Bible.

<sup>4</sup> Abraham failed to fear God and trust Him with his future (see Gen 12, 16, 20).

<sup>5</sup> Edward G. Dobson, *Abraham: The Lord will Provide* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1993), 145.

<sup>6</sup> It is no surprise that the next chapter (Gen 23) deals with the death of Sarah. God used the offering of Isaac to prepare Abraham for the death of his wife.

<sup>7</sup> There was a 24 year time-gap between Gen 12:4 and 17:1. Another year passed before Isaac was born. Now Isaac is perhaps ten years old or more (21:8).

<sup>8</sup> The repetition of the word "son" (13 times) reiterates the severe nature of this test.

<sup>9</sup> With every passing word, it gets worse.

<sup>10</sup> On these mountains God later appeared to David who built an altar to the Lord (2 Sam 24:16-25). Here also Solomon built his temple (2 Chron 3:1) and Jesus Christ died. This place would one day be called "Jerusalem."

<sup>11</sup> God abhors human sacrifice (Lev 18:21; 20:2; Deut 12:31; Ps 106:35-38; Ezek 20:30-31), so when Abraham was about to slay Isaac, God stopped him short and provided an alternative sacrifice.

<sup>12</sup> "Moriah" means, "Where the Lord provides" or "Where the Lord appears."

<sup>13</sup> Michael P. Green, *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), Electronic Ed.

<sup>14</sup> Lit. "We are determined to go, we are determined to worship, and we are determined to return."

<sup>15</sup> God never asks us to do something He Himself is unwilling to do. We need to remember that God gave His one and only Son as a once-for-all sacrifice for the sins of the world.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Eaton, *Preaching through the Bible: Genesis 12-23* (England: Sovereign World, 1999), 112.

<sup>17</sup> The Hebrew says "another ram." Ancient and modern versions have missed the point when they render "a ram" or "a ram behind him." Isaac was the first ram. Here is the second one.

<sup>18</sup> Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), Electronic Ed.

<sup>19</sup> God spoke directly to Abraham eight times (Gen 12:1, 7, 13:14; 15:1; 17:1; 18:1; 21:12; 22:1, 15).

<sup>20</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: Vol. 2 Genesis 12-36* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998 [1985]), 707.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Gen 12:1-3, 7, 13-16; 17:1-8, 15-16, 19-21.

<sup>22</sup> The word "because" bears this out (Gen 22:16, 18).

<sup>23</sup> Gen 22:16-18 are the last words spoken by God to Abraham in Genesis, and their significance should not be underestimated. From now on there is no doubt about the fulfillment of the promise. Abraham's obedience prompted God to guarantee his promises with an oath.