

## **“PASSING THE TEST”** **(Genesis 22:1-24)**

Some of you might remember the old Timex watch commercials that demonstrated the durability of their watches by putting them through various torture tests. Each commercial would feature outlandish tests such as dropping the watch from a building, rolling over it with a truck, or putting it through a washing machine – no matter what was done to it, the watch survived. One commercial featured Timex watches strapped to the bellies of Sumo wrestlers, and another had an opera singer’s shrill voice shattering every object in the opera hall – except the Timex watch. And after each torture test – at the end of each commercial – would come the famous Timex slogan: “It takes a licking, and keeps on ticking.” It was a fantastic slogan and reinforced to consumers that they could trust Timex watches because they were tested and proven.

Sometimes it’s easy to feel like you’re going through a Timex torture test when life pulls and stretches you to your very limit, and according to God’s Word these tests are designed by God to prove that your faith is genuine. Will you take a licking and keep on ticking? In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus talks about those who receive God’s Word with joy, but as soon as a time of testing comes along, they fall away. James says that genuine faith will result in works – if it’s real, it will survive testing and be proven reliable.

Tests are hard – and sometimes they seem tortuous – and it’s helpful to observe those who have gone through times of testing and have come out the other side – and there’s no one better to teach us how to face testing than Abraham, the father of faith. Over the course of his life Abraham endured a variety of tests – but none was bigger than the one he faces in Genesis 22 – a test that would require every ounce of his faith and resiliency. From this story we learn four principles that guide us through times of testing so that we pass with flying colors.

The first principle is to **expect tests from God**. As we come to chapter 22, Abraham has been walking with the Lord for around forty years, and the first twenty-five years of his walk are spent waiting on God to provide a child to fulfill the promises God made to him. In chapter 21, the promised son is finally born, little Isaac, and Abraham settles down in Beersheba. After several years of uncertainty and waiting, life had taken on a peaceful rhythm to it. Things are quiet. But then, out of nowhere, God once again speaks to Abraham.

Verses 1-2 say, “Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, ‘Abraham!’ ‘Here I am,’ he replied. Then God said, ‘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.’”

It’s always good to read well-known passages like this as if you are reading them for the first time, and when you do, you’re left dumbfounded. Everything about God’s command to Abraham seems absurd – why after twenty-five years of waiting would God give Abraham a son, only to give him back to God? Why would God, who promised to build from Abraham a great nation, ask him to offer his only son – his only descendant – as a sacrifice? And the biggest question of all is: Why does a holy and just God tell Abraham to kill his son – something he explicitly forbids elsewhere in scripture?

Right away in verse one we are assured as readers that God never intended for Abraham to kill his son – it was a test. What was God testing? We find out later in the story that God is testing his faith – He wants to prove that Abraham’s faith is the real thing – to prove that he will trust and obey God no matter what. And the ultimate proof will be surrendering to God what he loves and treasures the most – his one and only son he so long waited for and in whom he had placed all of his earthly hopes.

God never wanted Abraham to kill Isaac, but He wanted his willingness to do so. One of the biggest tests of faith is surrendering to God what we love the most. When people came to Jesus and said they wanted to follow Him, Jesus didn’t say, “Great to have you, come aboard.” Instead, He probed would-be followers with questions designed to test their willingness to surrender everything to follow Him.

For example, in Matthew 10:37 Jesus says, “Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” Jesus isn’t saying that following Him means that you can’t love your family and those closest to you – He’s challenging would-be followers to consider their ultimate loyalty and priorities. Who do you love more? If it comes down to a matter of choosing between family and Jesus – as it often did in the first century – you must choose Jesus. Love for Jesus must exceed every other kind of love.

Another example is the rich young ruler. Jesus said, “If you want eternal life, you must give all that you have to the poor.” Jesus was testing the sincerity of the young man’s desire to follow Him, and He knew that he loved his riches more than Jesus.

The ultimate test in Abraham’s life is the willingness to give up what he treasures most and say, “Here is my son, Lord, he’s yours – whatever you want me to do, I’ll do.” The Christian life is a continual life of surrender in which you let go of things that you put ahead of God – whether it’s possessions, desires, or relationships – God wants your willingness to part with what you love the most as proof of your love for Him.

Someone has said that we all come into this world with clinched fists, and that’s probably true. We come out of our mother’s womb with little clinched fists and we try to hold onto as many things as we can throughout life. If you cling too tightly to someone or something, it will become your idol – your identity and security will be wrapped up in that to which you cling. God wants surrender – He wants you to live with unclenched hands so that He can fill them with something far better.

Don’t miss the fact that Abraham’s biggest test comes when he’s about 115 years old. You’d think that by this time Abraham has learned every possible lesson there was to learn and that God was done testing him – give the old man a break – but we never stop growing as Christian – there’s always more to learn – and as long as we dwell in our earthly vessel, there is always more to surrender.

The second principle to remember when tested is to **focus on obedience, not explanations**. When you face a test or trial the first thing you tend to do is ask “Why?” “Why this, why now, why me?” There is a human inclination to have to know why – to have a reason for what is happening. One thing I’ve learned through my own testing is that God’s reasons are often hidden – sometimes we later discover the reason, and sometimes this side of heaven we’ll never know. But that’s what walking by faith is all about – if we knew why everything was happening, we’d walk by sight and not by faith. I’ve slowly learned over the years, and I’m still learning, to relinquish my need to know why and accept what God gives me. Sometimes that takes a long time – many years – to learn – and Abraham is still learning it at age 115.

Imagine what goes through Abraham's mind when he hears God say, "Take your son and sacrifice him." It defied all logic and was not in God's character to ask such a thing – but Abraham obeys. Notice three characteristics of his obedience...

The first is **prompt obedience**. Verse 3 says... "Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about." Abraham immediately saddles up his donkey and does what the Lord tells him to do. There is no hesitation, there are no questions asked – only obedience. Abraham has walked with God for forty years and he's grown accustomed to not knowing all the answers. He trusts God even when he doesn't know what lies ahead.

The second is **sustained obedience**. Verse 4 says... "On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance." God tells Abraham where to take Isaac – he was to take him to Mount Moriah – but he doesn't give him a timetable. It's a 50-mile journey to Mount Moriah, which takes about three days. During this time, Abraham has a lot of time to think... "Did I really hear what I think I heard God say? I don't know about all this." How many times did Abraham think about turning around and going back home? Abraham had given into fear and doubt more than once in the past, but after years of walking with God he's developed a tough faith, a resilient faith – he's seen God work before and He trusts Him to work all things for good in this ordeal. So he keeps going.

Eugene Peterson wrote a book with a title that sticks in your mind. The book is called *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. Our walk of faith is a long journey of ups and downs, and twists and turns, and the key is just to put one foot in front of the other and keep heading the same direction. Sometimes a test might last twenty-five years – as Abraham did in waiting for a child – but the important thing is that you wake up each day and trust and obey – and over time your faith will grow stronger and more resilient.

The third is a **confident obedience**. Verse 5... "He said to his servants, 'Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.'" This is a remarkable statement. Abraham says to his servant, "We will come back to you," not just "I" will come back, but "we" will come back to you. Abraham had come to the conclusion that whatever happened on that mountain, God would fulfill His promise of giving him many descendants through Isaac. Isaac would live. In fact, Hebrews 11:19 says that Abraham reasoned that if Isaac was slain, God would bring him back from the dead! Abraham was confident that he would not bury his son on the mountain.

The third principle we learn from Abraham's testing is not only to expect tests, to focus on obedience – not explanations, but also that we should **depend on God's provision**. They arrive at Mount Moriah and we read in verses 6-8... "Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, 'Father?' 'Yes, my son?' Abraham replied. 'The fire and wood are here,' Isaac said, 'but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?' Abraham answered, 'God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.' And the two of them went on together."

It's easy to forget that Isaac is a part of this equation. He's not a little boy – he's probably in his mid-teens – and after watching his dad prepare many sacrifices and he notices something's odd. "Dad?" Yes, son." "What's going on? I see the matches, I see the wood, I see the knife, but where's the lamb?" Isaac knows that in a burnt offering a lamb is slain and consumed in a fire as an act of worship to the Lord. It not only pictured total surrender to God, but foreshadowed the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus – the perfect lamb of God – slain in our place on the cross.

Isaac says, “I see everything we need, but where’s the lamb?” Abraham says, “God will provide one, son. I don’t know how He’ll provide, but we can trust Him to do so.” It’s obvious that Abraham has grown leaps and bounds in his faith – he knows God’s character – and he knows that if God promised many descendants through Isaac that somehow, someday, God would provide a lamb in place of Isaac. And without realizing it, Abraham prophesies of the day 2000 years in the future when God would provide His own Son as an atoning sacrifice for sin, which we’ll take more about in a moment.

Verse 9 says... “When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.” You’d expect Isaac to resist and refuse to go on the altar, but he appears to trust his father just as his father trusts God.

Verses 10-12 says, “Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, ‘Abraham! Abraham!’ ‘Here I am,’ he replied. ‘Do not lay a hand on the boy,’ he said. ‘Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.’”

This is called passing the test. God says, “Now I know – I know that you fear me, that you love and obey me, because you have released to me what you treasure most.” God never intended for Abraham to kill his son – He was testing his willingness to do so. It’s one thing to say you have faith, but the sincerity of your faith is revealed when you’re tested. God wants you to be like a Timex watch that takes a licking and keeps on ticking. He wants you to learn surrender and be “all in” in your faith, and the only way that can happen is through testing.

While Abraham and Isaac are rejoicing, verses 13-14 says that Abraham looked up... “Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns. He went over and took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. So Abraham called that place The Lord Will Provide. And to this day it is said, ‘On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided.’”

Notice the pattern here – it was not until Abraham released Isaac to the Lord – it was not until he surrendered all to God – that the Lord provided. It’s kind of like a lifeguard who cannot help a drowning person until they stop fighting and surrender to the one trying to save them. It was when Abraham released Isaac that God stepped in and provided a way out for Abraham. God waited until Abraham’s hand was raised in the air – at the very last minute – the 11th hour, 59th minute, and 59th second – before He intervened. God took Abraham to the extreme limit of testing. Would Abraham trust Him to the end? And the answer is yes – Abraham was prepared to obey God all the way.

Abraham was fond of memorializing places God had worked in his life, and the name he gives this place is “Jehovah Jireh” – *The Lord Will Provide*. Without realizing it, Abraham was not just memorializing God’s present provision for Him, but God’s future provision for the whole world. You’ve probably noticed as we’ve gone through this story all the similarities there are to the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. I thought about preaching a whole sermon on this next week, but let me just quickly show you eight pictures of Christ and gospel we find in this story:

- First, both sons are only sons loved by their Father (Mark 1:11).
- Second, and this is amazing, both Isaac and Jesus were sacrificed on the same mountain. Mount Moriah is the name of the mountain in Jerusalem where Solomon built his temple, and today is one of the most valuable pieces of real estate in the world – where the Dome of the Rock sits.
- Third, both were sacrificed as a burnt offering. The Jews believed that the altar of burnt offering in the temple was placed on the exact spot where Abraham built his altar to sacrifice Isaac.
- Fourth, both had wood placed upon them – Jesus carried His cross to the site of His crucifixion and then nailed to the cross.
- Fifth, both sons submitted to the will of their father – the night before His death Jesus said, “Not my will, but yours be done.”
- Sixth, in both stories a lamb is provided by God. When John the Baptist saw Jesus he said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).
- Seventh, in both stories a lamb dies in place of sinners. Verse 13 says that Abraham took the ram and sacrificed it as a burnt offering *instead of his son*. This is the heart of the gospel – that you and I because of our sins deserve death, but Jesus died in our place – He died as our substitute for sin.
- Eighth, both Isaac and Jesus were raised to life on the third day. Isaac was raised figuratively, and Christ was raised literally on the third day.

In many ways this story foreshadows the death and resurrection of Jesus, and for that reason alone this is one of the most important chapters in the Old Testament. I probably should have preached a whole sermon on this, but we move on.

When tested, don't be surprised – expect them. When tested, focus on obedience, not explanations. When tested, depend on God's provision. And in verses 15-19 we see the fourth and final principle: **after testing, look forward to God's blessings**. At the end of every test is reward. Aren't you glad? Job said, “But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold.” As excruciating as testing may be, we come out on the other side richer, deeper, and more mature. And we reap all the blessings that come from obedience.

God blessed Abraham in two specific ways. First, He assured Abraham of his future. Verses 15-19... “The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time and said, ‘I swear by 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. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.’ Then Abraham returned to his servants, and they set off together for Beersheba. And Abraham stayed in Beersheba.”

Abraham did not live to see these blessings fulfilled in his lifetime – Hebrews 11 says he “died in faith” – to his dying breath he believed God would keep His promises. He lived with an eager anticipation of his eternal reward in heaven. In the same way, many of God’s blessings and rewards will not be realized in this lifetime but in the life to come – when we stand before the Lord and are rewarded for our faith and obedience.

The second way God blessed Abraham was receiving news about his long-lost family. In verses 20-24 Abraham gets a report on his brother Nahor and his nieces and nephews. In this list of names, one name stands out – the granddaughter of Nahor, named Rebekah – and in chapter 24 God will orchestrate the marriage between Isaac and Rebekah, and the family line of Abraham will continue.

Throughout his life, God called Abraham to surrender more and more and more to him – and he calls us to do the same. We resist the idea of surrender because we naturally cling to what we have. But Jesus asks us to let go. In Matthew 16:25 He says, “If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it (Matthew 16:25 NLT). Whatever God asks you to lose or give up in this life, you will get infinitely more in the life to come.

Tests are a normal part of the Christian life – so expect them. As someone said, “You’re either in a test, just out of a test, or entering into a test.” Rather than viewing tests as a something negative, what would it be like if you viewed them as something positive? Positive in that tests prove that your faith is the real thing – that they deepen your faith and confidence in the Lord – and they develop perseverance and resilience – that you take a licking and keep on ticking – and when you come out on the other side you are stronger, deeper, and more surrendered to the perfect will of God.