

September 9, 2007
Pentecost 15

"Faith Put to the Test and Strengthened"

GENESIS 22:1-17

Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. ² Then God said, "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." ³ Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled 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. ⁴ On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. 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." ⁶ 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, ⁷ 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?" ⁸ Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. ¹¹ But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied. ¹² "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." ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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." ¹⁵ The angel of the LORD called to Abraham from heaven a second time ¹⁶ and said, "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, ¹⁷ 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, ¹⁸ and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."

When I studied to be a pastor we learned the Greek and Hebrew languages. It was not easy. It seemed that there were pop tests or quizzes almost every day that tested us on new words and concepts we were asked to learn. Without that daily testing of the words and how to use them in the right way we might slack off and never learn the languages as we should.

We are told that the Lord God tested Abraham. It was the Lord who planted faith in Abraham to believe in his amazing promises. It was the Lord who tested the faith and caused it to grow by confronting Abraham with all sorts of challenges. At first glance it may seem cruel for God to ask Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac until you realize that God had

promised Abraham it would be through Isaac that all nations on earth would be blessed. Even if Abraham took the life of his son and burnt his body on the altar, the Lord would raise him to life again. Abraham was so sure of this that he told his servants, "Wait here until the boy and I return to you again."

I have to admit when I first heard this account of Scripture as a child I was deeply troubled and disturbed. It did not seem fair to me that God would test Abraham's loyalty and love by asking him to offer his son. What if the Lord asked me to give up one of my pets on the farm? Would that be fair? I did not realize the amazing truth that this was not a test of love but of faith. It is not unfair and cruel if something is taken away from you for a moment but then immediately returned to you again.

What do the following items all have in common? (Show a weight, hand spring, surgical cord) They are all used to strengthen muscle by challenging it, causing it to have pain, and then strengthening it. "No pain, no gain." So it is with faith. The daily grind of life and the various tests are opportunities to grow stronger as we trust more in the unfailing promises of God and his Word. Let's take some time this morning to look more closely at how God strengthens faith through testing.

What a test for Abraham and Isaac

We are told "Some time later God tested Abraham." This is not the only place in the Bible where it tells us that God tests faith for the purpose of strengthening. Remember how the children of Israel gathered only one basket of manna for their food each day. They learned to trust the Lord to take care of them. It says that God used this to test them. Through the testing their faith was strengthened.

What a test the Lord had for Abraham! "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." Abraham loved his son just as we love our sons and daughters. See the joy on his face when Isaac was born and he is a hundred years old. The name Isaac means laughter. Can't you hear father Abraham laughing out loud as he chases his little boy around the tent and plays with him? Nights under the stars he has long talks with his teenage son about God's promises of descendants as numerous as the stars and one descendant who would bless all nations on earth. The Lord put Abraham's faith to the test. "Sacrifice the son you love." Abraham had taken lambs, sacrificed them with his knife, placed them on an altar and watched as the smoke from their burning bodies ascended up to the Lord. Now he was asked to do this with his son in a special place designated by the Lord.

"Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled 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." There is no hesitation because the promise is so real. Sacrifice as God requested. Then watch in amazement as God brings your son back to life again. Both of you will come back from that event strengthened more in God's promises for your life.

The wood had to be cut. Can you imagine for a moment how hard it would be to chop the

wood and pick out the best pieces that will be used to burn the body of your son? How black would the body of his son be before the Lord performed the miracle and brought him back to life again without even a burn mark on his body or even the hint of the smell of smoke or burnt flesh? Faith believes that the God of promises always provides and always does things perfectly without a trace of failure or defeat. Isaiah 30:15, "In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength."

They traveled to the place designated by the Lord, to Mount Moriah, the place where the temple of the Lord would one day be built. Abraham tells the 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." Note the confidence, the faith and the quiet trust in the Lord. "We will return to you." Hebrews 11 says, "By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He would have received the promises if he had sacrificed his one and only son, even though God had said to him, 'It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.' Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death."

Father and son began their ascent up the mountain of the Lord alone. Abraham places the wood on his son. Here is no small scrawny lad tagging along with his father. Here is a young man, strong and robust, able to carry a load of wood up the mountain, and certainly able to escape the grasp of his father who was about to take his life. The quiet moments together are broken by the loving voice of the son asking his father, "'The fire and wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?'" The answer that comes back does not surprise the son who has grown up with the faith of his father in the promises and providence of the Lord. Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." Then it says that they "walked on together." Some of the best moments a father and son ever have together are those times when they solemnly walk together believing firmly in the promises of the Lord and trusting the Lord provides and takes care of us, especially our salvation.

They come to the place designated by the Lord and the time has come to build the altar. You have to assume that somewhere in the course of their walking together and building this altar together that Abraham explains why the altar is larger than usual and why more wood was needed and why he must bind Isaac and lay him on the altar to be sacrificed like a lamb. We marvel at the faith of Abraham that was willing to sacrifice his son and wait on God to raise him to life again. We are just as amazed at Isaac's willingness to go along with his father and trust the words of the Lord to be true. Isaac knows that beyond the knife and the wood and the fire there is the reality of being raised to life again and walking back down that mountain basking together in the glory of the Lord who provides a mighty miracle.

Abraham takes the knife. Literally the Hebrew says that he stretches out the knife as someone might do in the sacrifice of a lamb, as quickly and humanely as possible without even the slightest pain. The properly administered stroke swiftly and gently will bring instant death and lots of blood. The wood will be lit and the father will watch the smoke ascend to heaven and the fire consume his son. It is all OK because the Lord God had given a promise, an amazing promise. Isaac will be the one from whom the future descendants will come and God will raise the son back to life again. Very few challenges you and I face this week will ever measure up to what Abraham and Isaac faced together. The Lord God

who tests the faith of his people also finds the way to strengthen faith.

What strength from the Lord

The Lord who gives the strength to believe intervenes with the words, "Abraham, Abraham, do not lay a hand on the boy. 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." Abraham feared God. He respected God with the solid conviction God would raise the son back to life again. Such conviction of faith can only be planted in the heart by God. The Lord God loves to see that faith he had planted grow and be strengthened in all of us.

The hand holding the knife drops down. Abraham lifts his eyes and sees a ram caught by its horns in the thicket. This magnificent ram now serves as a substitute for the life of Isaac. He offers the ram in place of Isaac just as God our Father offered his Son Jesus in our place as our substitute to rescue us from death and eternal punishment. Abraham gave a special name to that mountain. He called it, "The Lord provides."

Isn't that the theme of your life? The Lord provides. It is the Lord who provided you with your family, your home, your food, your job, your friends, your clothing that you wear. The Lord has provided you with his Word that teaches you the truth of how this world began, why we are here and what will happen to us when we die. The Lord has also provided us with the best gift of all. He has given us what Abraham treasured so highly, the righteousness that comes through that descendant who came from the Jewish people, Jesus our Savior. The Lord has opened your eyes to see how frail, weak and sinful you are, and how often you fall short of God's glory. He convinces you that no matter how hard you try you cannot prepare yourself for the final judgment through the life you try to live. Then he lifts up your eyes to see Jesus, not caught in a thick brush, but nailed to a cross. You see him as the ransom payment for all sin and his precious blood that cleanses you.

How many tests and challenges will come to you this week? How many pop quizzes will there be in your life in this next month. Who knows when someone we love may suddenly be taken from our lives? When people we love die in the arms of Jesus we know that we will see them again, even if their bodies are reduced to ashes and dust. In the light of eternity the time it takes for this to happen will be only like the snap of a finger or the blink of an eye. The Lord God swore once again to Abraham that he would keep his promises just as he swears to us here in his Word that everything he tell us his true and it will happen and it is real. Are you ready for the tests that come to you this week? You are because you are standing on the promises of God just as Abraham did. Amen.