

February 26, 2012
Lent 1

"Faith Tested and Strengthened"

GENESIS 22:1-18

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, 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." ³ 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. 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^[a] 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."

How do you develop stronger muscles? You actually develop stronger muscles by tearing them down. When you lift weights or do other bearing activities you cause small tears in the muscle fiber. Your body responds to this damage by repairing the injured muscle fiber and adding more muscle tissue to prevent future damage. Think of how your body can repair a broken bone and actually make it stronger.

We are not here this morning to learn about getting bigger muscles, but we are here today to learn about having our faith strengthened. The Lord puts our faith to the test and then he strengthens our faith in his promises and in his love for us. At this place in your life and at this point of time most of you are going through some form of testing.

Life has more than its share of problems for dear Christians that are no different from the problems facing people who are not Christian. You may be having problems getting along with other people. You may be experiencing physical problems in your body. You may be struggling with being ashamed of who you are. Then the testing comes. Will we put our faith and trust in God's promises and in his love for us, or will we lean on our own resources and our own strength?

The Lord gave Abraham an amazing trust in his promises. Let's take a closer look at how his faith was tested and then strengthened even more.

The test

"Some time later God tested Abraham." The word for testing that is used here is also used to describe how the Lord God allowed the people of Israel to go through hard times so they would learn to put greater trust in his promises.

God told Abraham, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about." At this point in his life Abraham is a very old man, about 120 years old. At the age of 100 the Lord blessed him with a son named Isaac. The name Isaac means "laughter." Can't you hear Abraham laughing as he chases his little boy around the tent? He shows his son the stars in the heavens and shares with him the promise of God that said they would have descendants more numerous than the stars. "Take you son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love." Abraham loved his son Isaac and Isaac loved his father Abraham. Oh, how they loved each other.

Take your son, your only son whom you love to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about." Abraham had built many altars to the Lord, placed wood on them, and sacrificed lambs from his flock. Now the Lord wants him to lay his son on an altar made of stones, take his life and then burn his body. All of this makes no sense whatsoever; unless you realize that the Lord God had promised Abraham that through his son Isaac all nations on earth would be blessed. God's promise was so real to Abraham he knew if he took the life of his son, God would raise him to life again. The book of Hebrews makes that clear to us when it says this about Abraham's faith. "By faith Abraham, when God test him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He had had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God has 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."

Now we watch as Abraham gets ready to leave for the region of Moriah. He saddles his donkey. He takes two servants and his beloved Isaac along with him. He carefully chooses the wood to offer up his son, wood that will burn hot and clean. And then there was the knife, the knife that would be used to take the life of his son. After three days, they come near the place God has chosen for the sacrifice. Abraham tells his servants to stay behind while he and Isaac go up to the mountain to worship. Did you catch what Abraham told his servants? He told them "We will worship and then we will come back to you." Abraham was convinced that God would raise his son back to life again, because God had promised

that the future Messiah would come from Isaac and his descendants, the Jewish people.

Abraham places the wood on his son Isaac. Isaac is no little boy. He is a grown man, capable of carrying a substantial load of wood up the mountain, enough wood for a sacrifice. Abraham carried the fire, perhaps some coals in a small pot. He also carried the knife. Isaac assumes the wood, the fire and the knife will be used to sacrifice a lamb to the Lord. He asks his father, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering." The father tells his son, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." All of his life Isaac had heard the stories his father told him about how the Lord provides and how the Lord promises and keeps his promises. If his dad tells him the Lord will provide a lamb, then it was only a matter of time before the Lord would lead them to a lamb that could be used for the sacrifice.

Then it says, "The two of them walked on together." We have to assume that as they walked together, Abraham explains to Isaac what is going to happen to him. By the time they reach the top of the mountain Isaac is willing to let his father take his life, because he too is convinced that the Lord will keep his promise to bring back to life again.

"The two of them walked on together." I ask you to pause for a moment and think about all the people the Lord has brought into your life who have reminded you of God's promises especially when you faced the times of life that challenged you and tested you. You watched as the body of someone you love was placed into the ground, but then you heard the words of promise spoken at the gravesite: "We will all be changed, in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet." You are crushed by what a sinful person you are. You realize how a perfect and holy God could never accept a person like you. You confess with Abraham, "I am ashes and dust." Then the Lord brings you his promise that fills you with hope, "The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanses us from all sin." The tasks of life seem overwhelming. You walk on together with other Christians and you hear them sing to you in a Psalm 46, "The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our fortress."

The strengthening

The Lord who gave Abraham a strong faith strengthens that faith even more. Abraham takes some stones from the area and builds an altar. He arranges the wood on the altar. He binds up his son and then lays him on the altar. As Isaac holds out his hands to let his father bind them, we think of how they came to arrest Jesus and tie up his hands. Jesus willingly allowed himself to be handed over for our sins, because he also knew as Isaac did that the heavenly Father would raise him to life again. Romans 4 says of Jesus, "He was delivered for our offenses and raising again for our justification."

Can't you see Isaac trembling? Can't you see Abraham trembling as he raises the knife to take the life of the son? They tremble, but they also trust the Lord will come through. The Lord does come through. The angel of the Lord, Jesus himself, calls out: "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. That means he stood in awe of God's promises. He believed with all his heart that the Lord God who had kept his promise to give him a son in his old age, would also raise his son to life again.

The Lord further strengthens Abraham's faith by providing a ram that he could use for the sacrifice. "Abraham looked up and there in a thicket he saw a ram caught by its horns." He took the ram and offered it to the Lord in the place of his son Isaac. He also called that very special place, "The Lord provides."

That was the story of Abraham's life, "The Lord provides." That is the story of your life, my dear Christian. The Lord your God has given you a lamb to be sacrificed in your place to spare you from the judgment that is to come. John the Baptist introduced Jesus into the world with these words, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." The prophet Isaiah tells us, "We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." 2 Corinthians 5 says, "God made him to be sin for us who knew no sin." Your heavenly Father will allow you to experience all sorts of struggles in this life so he can direct your attention to the Lamb he has provided for you, the gift of his Son.

The Lord further strengthened Abraham's faith by repeating the promises he had made to Abraham many years before. "I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand of the seashore....and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed because you have obeyed me." Abraham took God at his Word. He believed in a future descendant who would bless the whole world. Genesis 15 says, "Abraham believed and it was credited to him as righteousness."

Dear Christian, the Lord is not going to put a protective shield or bubble around you to protect you from the problems of this life. He allows these problems to come to you and me so that he can lead us to trust even more in his promises just as he did with Abraham. And so we joyfully sing: "And he will raise you up on eagles' wings, Bear you on the breath of dawn, Make you to shine like the sun, And hold you in the palm of his hand." Amen.