

## How to Respond When Faith is Tested

Our scripture reading is from Hebrews 11:17-19. (But I also will be reading Genesis 22 later) “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, of whom it was said, “Through Isaac, shall your offspring be named.” He considered that God was able, even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.”

**\*\***Our scripture begins: “By faith Abraham, **WHEN HE WAS TESTED**, -offered up Isaac”. Abraham acted in extreme obedience, and with complete confidence in God. He offered his own son, whom he loved, by faith...when he was tested.

Faith is confidence in God. But your confidence **WILL BE** tested. Something will happen, somebody will do something, somebody will say something, that staggers your faith.

We get tested when something that matters to us is threatened. Something may happen that shatters an important dream you had. That career you wanted never happens. A child may turn against God, or against you. A spouse may die, or be unfaithful. A close friend may desert you. You may be greatly misunderstood about some situation and then criticized for it. Or maybe you try **REALLY HARD** to do something for God and it just doesn't get off the ground. And then we are all dealing with the uncertainty and upheaval and dangers of the present Corona virus crisis.

All of that is a test. And we should **EXPECT** that our faith will be tested. Peter said, “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you”. **\*\*\***Our confidence in God **AND** our

obedience to God must be demonstrated under stress. Our faith cannot be proven to be real, without testing. Faith cannot become stronger, without testing.

Oswald Chambers said, “When you are on the mountaintop, it’s easy to say, “Oh yes, I believe God can do it,” but you have to come down from the mountain to the demon-possessed valley and face the realities that scoff at your Mount-of-Transfiguration belief.” It’s in the valley that our faith is tested! And the question is, “What will you do when YOUR faith is tested?”. This passage tells us what Abraham did. He lived by faith when he was tested, and offered up Isaac”.

The indomitable faith of Abraham is recorded in this scripture to show US how to handle the testing of OUR faith. He shows us how to overcome, to be steadfast, to obey when it is really hard, to NOT be overwhelmed or defeated.

In all tests, the ultimate issue is “Will we trust God through this?” Do we believe God is good and wise and can be trusted with our lives and our future? Will we maintain our confidence IN God AND our obedience TO God, in our hour of testing? -even in our hour of extreme testing? THAT is the question for each of us this morning!

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I think to fully understand Abraham’s test with his son Isaac, we have to go back to the beginning of creation.

After Adam sinned, the human race degenerated into great wickedness. God decided to destroy mankind by a flood. Only Noah and his family were saved. After the flood, the descendants of Noah also fell into great wickedness. They gathered in the land of Shinar and built the tower of Babel in rebellion against the Lord. So

God, in an act of judgment, confused their ability to communicate, and scattered them all over the earth. For the second time the whole human race was in complete spiritual darkness.

But God had a plan to make people part of his family. He started by choosing one man, named Abraham, through whom “all the nations of the earth would be blessed”, meaning people all over the world would come out from under God’s judgment and wrath and **INSTEAD** would be blessed with God’s kindness and favor for all eternity! This blessing would flow to mankind through Abraham’s seed or descendant. Ultimately that would be Jesus Christ, but first Abraham had to have children.

So God appeared to Abraham and promised him a son, and descendants, as many as the stars in the heaven. And Abraham believed God. So Abraham and Sarah expected to start having kids. But that didn’t happen. Years passed, and no kids. They became old, past childbearing years, and no kids. But finally, through a supernatural work of God - Isaac was born.

Abraham and Sarah clearly saw him as a miracle baby, a precious gift of God. And they loved him! And he was the key to all these amazing promises that God had made to them. But Genesis 22 tells us that “Some time later God **TESTED** Abraham.”

(God) 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.” (Now listen carefully how Abraham handles this test!)

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. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. 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.”

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?” (How would Abraham answer his boy’s question!)

Abraham answered, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” And the two of them went on together. 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. 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.”

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.”

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.”

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Two questions come to my mind from this story”: Where did Abraham’s remarkable obedience and composure and peace come from? Secondly: Where is the struggle, and anger and questioning of God, that we might expect in this story? The answer to both questions is found in Hebrews 11. “By Faith Abraham, was in the act of offering up his son (because) “He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead”. He ACTED well because of his complete confidence in God – He thought even if I must take Isaac’s life, God will raise him up and give him back to me.

Sometimes this story is told emphasizing the struggle in Abraham’s heart, over giving up his son. We can all imagine Abraham trudging up Mount Moriah with great anguish, and doubts in his heart. We could easily think of him reluctantly obeying God. But that is NOT what the Bible tells us! Abraham likely had some conflicts over God’s command. But the Bible tells us only of Abraham’s unwavering faith and obedience. God said “Do this”. And early the next morning he went!

We all have human emotions and struggles and we should not deny them, but neither should we give undue priority or emphasis to them. It is good to be honest when we ARE struggling with doubt, fears or even disobedience. But it is NOT a good, or safe place to stay! We need to quickly turn our hearts to complete childlike confidence in God, and not dwell in the dark shadows of doubt and disobedience!

When I was a senior at ISU we went to a Missions Conference and attended a workshop led by Elizabeth Elliott. After the workshop a female student came to Elizabeth and described an issue she was struggling with God about”. She barely got the words out of her mouth and Elizabeth said, “Struggling is just delayed obedience.” Decide to obey God and your struggle will be over.” Those words came out of her mouth with such power and authority that Cindy and I never forgot those words. The sooner we decide to believe and obey the sooner we will live in victory!

Abraham’s story is perhaps the greatest act of faith in human history. Several key spiritual lessons for us:

\*First: You do not have to cave-in to unbelief when your faith is tested. Some of us may have developed a sort of automatic response of collapsing in despair, or getting angry, whenever things go wrong, or get hard. And deep down inside we think we have no choice but to do that! We are just so used to it! Abraham’s story is just what we need to hear! When Abraham was tested, he did not throw away his confidence in God! Whatever test you are in right now, **YOU DO NOT HAVE TO THROW AWAY** your confidence in God!!

We must always guard against our human tendency to exaggerate our tests and trial and imagine they are far more severe than they really are. We sometimes do this to justify self pity and a lifestyle of grumbling or fear. The Bible continually reminds us of those who persevered in faith through really big tests as a way of helping us keep our tests in perspective. Hebrews 11 helps us do that!! Let’s consider Abraham, or those who suffered mocking and flogging, chains and imprisonment, or those who were sawn in two. They did all that **WITH** faith! **YOU TOO ACTUALLY CAN LIVE BY FAITH!**

On our recent trip, we had a lady who left her cell phone at a site. And going back to get it delayed our departure for about an hour. And then there was an electrical short in one of the rooms that started a small fire and that had to be dealt with. Our tour leader, Lon addressed these issues with our group but he said these were really small potatoes, and then led us in prayer praising God for his protection. Rather than seeing every problem as a full blown disaster, we should see SOME things as “small potatoes” and just go on praising God for his goodness to us.

Second: It is just as important to speak and act with confidence in God in our small daily tests as it the major tests of life! Every day we are called to demonstrate confidence in God through common irritations and set backs and disappointments! It would be a mistake for us to apply this message ONLY to some major set back or loss.

We are to walk with the same peace and composure and confidence, in our daily tests as Abraham demonstrated in his supreme test. In our ordinary days, our faith shows...or not! We must consider it a prime duty each day to consciously place our confidence in God, and live that way through the normal ups and downs of the day.

\*Third: Obey God all the way THROUGH your hour of testing! Always do the next right thing in the eyes of the Lord! Even when you cannot understand what God is up to. Abraham had to see the obvious conflict: Isaac was the promise. If Isaac dies the promise dies. But he left all that he didn't understand in God's hands and obeyed!!

FF Bruce said, “Abraham treated it as God's problem; it was for God, and not for Abraham, to reconcile his promise and his command. So, when the command was given, Abraham promptly set

about obeying it;”. God never asks us to understand everything, only to trust and obey!

One of the most frequent areas of testing is in the area of sexuality, marriage, romantic relationships. Our emotions and human desires are as intense about these things as most anything in life. We can easily be tempted to stray from trust and obedience in these areas.

Another area of testing is money. We have to have money to function in this world and it can be downright scary when we think of not having enough of it. But love of money or fears about money can tempt us to pursue money in a way that will keep us from making the kingdom of God our priority. Most of us will be tested at some time in life about whether we actually trust money or God.

Another key area of testing is our children. If we were honest some of might have to say, “I will trust God with everything but my kids”. We are deeply attached to our children and rightly so. But our kids cannot have priority over our obedience to God. We are deeply attached to our parents and rightly so but we may be tested to see if God holds the higher place than even our parents. Jesus said, “He who loves father or mother, son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me”. Let us be especially careful to trust and obey in these key areas of testing!!

\*Fourth: We need to trust God to redeem or resurrect our situations to a good and glorious outcome. That is what Abraham did! He just said, “God will raise Isaac from the dead!” We do not survive our tests by stoicism or grit. We survive by HOPE in God!! We believe that God will redeem what we are going through. We believe God’s answers will come, even if we wait till the resurrection for them. Paul said “We trust in God who raises the dead!!” He meant by that

that we trust in a God who does the humanly impossible!! What hopes and dreams of yours look dead to you this morning? Remember, Our God raises things that look hopeless to life!

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As we close, remember this one thing: “By faith Abraham, WHEN HE WAS TESTED, offered up Isaac”. He acted in extreme obedience and with complete faith. When you are tested, LIVE BY FAITH, do whatever it is that God puts before you. Put your confidence in God and He will fulfill his promises and goodness to you, even if he has to perform a resurrection to accomplish that for you!

Pray: God, when WE are tested let us be as obedient and as confident in you, as Abraham. That is how we WANT to live. That is how we CHOOSE to live. We believe you are good and wise and loving and that is enough for us to trust you and obey you.