

Sermon preached at Woodbury Community Church, Woodbury, MN on Sunday,
January 15, 2012, by Rev. Brian D. Schulenburg

GENESIS 22:1-19

2 He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."

THE CHALLENGE #3 **GOD'S INCREDIBLE SACRIFICE**

On November 1, 1992, my life changed forever. That was the day that our daughter Breanna was born. For months, I was convinced that Cyndi and I were going to have a son. When Breanna made her arrival into the world and it was absolutely clear that God had blessed us with a little girl, my world was turned upside down. I didn't think that I could love anything as much as the precious daughter that I was now holding in my arms. I watched as she took each breath, not wanting to take my eyes off of her for a second. In quiet moments as I would hold baby Breanna in a chair, I would listen to her breathing. I loved when her little fingers would clutch my pinky, and when her big brown eyes would stare up at me. I melted every time I saw her. She was truly a gift from God.

It wasn't long after Breanna was born, that I read Genesis 22:1-19. I had read the passage many times growing up, but now as a father I saw the passage differently. I was angry at God when I read the test that He put a man named Abraham through.

If you are unfamiliar with the story of Abraham, let me give you some background. In Genesis 12, God called a man named Abram to leave his country, his family and all that he was familiar with to go to a new land. God was calling Abram apart, to make him a great nation. In Genesis 12:2-3, God said, 2 "And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Talk about an incredible promise! Abram was 75 years old when God made this promise. As the years went on, Abram must have wondered if God was going to be true to His word, for Abram and his wife Sarai had no children. God reaffirmed his oath with Abram in Genesis 15, making a covenant with Him. But, when Sarai remained barren, she took matters into her own hands and asked Abram to sleep with her servant Hagar. Hagar became pregnant and Ishmael was born. Ishmael was not the child that God had promised Abram and Sarai. He would eventually become a great nation as well, and today Muslims around the world see Ishmael as the true heir of Abram. In Genesis 17, God institutes the covenant of circumcision with Abram and changes his name to Abraham and Sarai's name to Sarah, reaffirming to Abraham that he would be the father of nations and the patriarch of kings. By the end of the chapter, God tells Abraham that he will have a son and he should be called Isaac, which means, "Laughter, or Joy." When Sarah was 90 years old and Abraham was 100 years old,

Isaac was born. This is a full 25 years after the initial calling and promise that Abraham would become a great nation, and well after child bearing years.

Can you imagine what it would have been like for Abraham to hold Isaac? So long had he waited. Abraham had walked by faith and not by sight. And, I imagine that walking for so long waiting upon the promises of God to be fulfilled was more than challenging. I know it is difficult for me to wait on God for many things in my life. Waiting can sometimes cause us to question and doubt, and take things into our own hands. The Bible shows us Abraham's strengths and weaknesses, and we certainly learn great lessons from the way that he lived his life.

What do you think you would have done if you were Abraham and the voice of God instructed you to leave your family, your friends, all that you were familiar with to go to a new land and worship God? The author of Hebrews was so impressed with Abraham's faith that he wrote, "8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going." (Hebrews 11:8)

The author of Hebrews spent twelve verses in Hebrews 11, the great faith hall of fame chapter of the Bible, speaking about Abraham. This great father of the Jewish nation is talked about more than anyone else in that great chapter of Scripture. Abraham was a great model of faith, but far from perfect. So many times in Genesis you see Abraham's faith waver and stupid decisions made as a result of that faith wavering. He was like you and me that way.

When Genesis 22 opens, I have to believe that Abraham was living the good life. He had experienced God's fulfilled promise. His son had been born. He loved the boy with all of his heart. And then, God chooses to test Abraham.

1 After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 2 He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."

That doesn't sound like God, does it? It's easy to get angered in our 21st Century world at a God who would make such requests. It's hard to understand what God was thinking. I know Christians who question if it was Abraham just getting the facts wrong. They wonder if God's message somehow got lost in translation. What's going on here?

I was reading an article one of the Internet's thousand of articles on Tim Tebow the outspoken quarterback of the Denver Broncos, who will tell anyone who asks that he is a Christian first who just happens to play football. The press has made a big deal about the fact that he is a Christian and many stories have gone across the media about how God must be a Bronco fan for Tebow's team to keep winning games that they have no business even being in. Tebow has repeatedly said that he doesn't think God really cares about football, and that the Bronco's wins have nothing to do with God picking his

team to win over any other team. When reading the article that I did, I was disheartened, but not surprised, by some of the vitriol that I saw aimed at Tebow and at Christians. In the “comments” section of the article, reader after reader spewed hate for the evangelical Christian. One of those who commented on why Tebow stinks said something to the extent of, “Christians are idiots. How can you put your faith in an ancient book that affirms slavery, belittles women and endorses the killing of children and in an institution that just wants your money?”

The person who asked the question then used this story about God asking Abraham to sacrifice Isaac as his justification for wanting nothing to do with Christianity. Interesting! I think Genesis 22 has always been one of the Bible’s most puzzling and most misunderstood passages. It’s a passage we’ll never understand if we rush past the beginning of verse one. “1 After these things God tested Abraham.”

1. God tested Abraham – vs. 1, 2

Bruce Ball said the following in a sermon that he preached entitled, “A Test for You.”

“There is one constant in the kingdom of God. Every time God tests our faith, He also gives us something in return. That ‘something’ is a defining moment, and we refer to these as ‘personal testimonies’.

They give witness to the fact that God is active and working in our lives . . .

A man by the name of Horatio Spaffard was an American businessman, and he was scheduled to travel by boat with his wife and four children to Ireland. At the last minute, a big business deal kept him from going, so he sent them on and told them he would follow shortly. Halfway to its destination, in the middle of the ocean, the boat his family was on sank, killing all aboard.

When Mr. Spaffard received word of the accident, he immediately chartered another boat and went directly to the place the other boat had sunk. As he leaned against the railing, staring at the spot he lost his wife and children, with as much grief as a man can bear, words began to come into his mind. With tears flooding his eyes and sobs making it impossible to talk, he went to his cabin and began to put those words down on paper.

Those words are found in the hymn, *It Is Well With My Soul* . . .

Francis Havergal wrote many hymns in her life. She said she got most of her inspiration from small moments – defining moments. She said one of the strongest things she had ever seen was a painting of Jesus, wearing a crown of thorns with blood dripping down from the wounds. He is facing Pilate, and the caption of that painting was; ‘This, I have done for thee - - what hast thou done for me?’

When she got home, she wrote a poem about what that painting meant to her, but was so emotional when she read it; she threw it in the fireplace. Have you ever noticed that

God intervenes in the most miraculous of ways? As she walked by the fireplace, she threw the poem in, but like most sheets of paper, it flew out and landed on the floor without her seeing it. Her father picked it up, read it, and encouraged her to put music to it. She did, and the result was the hymn, *Take My Life, and Let It Be*.

How about you? Can you look back through your life and see moments where God tested you and that test became a defining moment? These moments abound in our lives. But it isn't just people that have defining moments. Sometimes, churches have them, too. Things that happen to bring the church back to a full focus on Jesus. What we find is that whatever happened was actually a test for the church. This is when some churches begin to fail. They start looking at the problem in the test, and forget that faith is the answer . . . For whose benefit do you think God tested Abraham? My personal feeling is that God knew the depth of Abraham's faith, but he wanted Abraham to realize the extent of his faith, too. Therefore, God gave Abraham a moment that was such a strong personal testimony that he would never doubt, or forget, the faith he had in the Lord."¹

Whenever I have read this passage of Scripture in the past, I've assumed that Isaac was a young boy when God tested Abraham in this way. I'm going to present a different idea to you in a few minutes. Those who believe that the Bible is endorsing child sacrifice apparently also feel the way that I have felt when I have traditionally read this passage; Isaac must have been a young child. Because of that, they assume that God ordained child sacrifice. But, God has never ordained nor will He ever ordain child sacrifice. Human sacrifice and more specifically child sacrifice was common in the region in which Abraham was living. It was something that he would have seen those involved in pagan religions practice from time to time. Scripture condemns the practice in Leviticus 18:21, 20:12, Jeremiah 19:5, 32:35, 2 Kings 3:27, 16:3, 17:17, 21:6, Psalm 106:37-38, and Ezekiel 16:21. Make no mistake God hates the idea.

But, he was using a common practice in the region where Abraham lived to test Abraham's faith. What do you suppose could be some of what God was testing?

I believe that God was testing how much Abraham believed that God was going to honor the covenant that He had made with Abraham, that through Isaac, God would make a great nation out of Abraham. So, He was testing whether or not Abraham took God at His Word, something which Abraham had repeatedly shown that He didn't trust in his less mature years. He was also testing if Abraham loved the gift or the Giver of the gift more. God was maturing Abraham's faith in the test.

I want you to look once more at verse 2.

2 He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."

¹ http://www.sermoncentral.com/print_friendly.asp?ContributorID=&SermonID=103157, pp. 1-2.

It's almost too painful to read. I want you to see something incredibly significant here. If you aren't opposed to writing in your Bibles, circle the word "love" in this verse. It is the first occurrence of the word "love" in all of Scripture! That is unbelievable to me! The Bible, God's love letter to us, which speaks of love over and over again doesn't use the word until Genesis 22. That is no mistake! God wanted us to see just how significant the test that He was putting Abraham through was. He also wanted us to notice the parallel between the love that Abraham, a mere man, had for Isaac, and the love that God the Father had with God the Son. God the Father, who has eternally existed in three persons with God the Son and God the Holy Spirit; has a perfect love for God the Son.

Look at John 3:16-17 in light of Genesis 22:2.

16 "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Abraham's Obedience – vs. 3-10

Look back at Genesis 22, where we see how Abraham responded to this test in verses 3-10.

3 So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. 4 On the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar. 5 Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you." 6 And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son. And he took in his hand the fire and the knife. So they went both of them together. 7 And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here I am, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" 8 Abraham said, "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together.

9 When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. 10 Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son.

How does Abraham respond to God's test? With absolute obedience! There is no arguing here. There is no bargaining with God. Remember, this is the Abraham who bargained with God on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah, asking God if enough righteous people could be found if the city could be spared. This is the man who slept with his wife's servant so that he could help God come through on the promise to make him a great nation. This is the man who lied about his wife being his sister, twice, allowing her to be taken by other men so that he could save his hide. Instead of trusting God

completely, Abraham's earlier life was characterized by trust up to a point. Now, he trusts God so much that he takes his son up to sacrifice him on an altar.

Hebrews 11:17-19 gives us a hint into how he could have such faith. Abraham knew that God was going to stay true to his word to make a great nation through Isaac's offspring. So, even if Isaac died on the altar, God would have to raise him from the dead, something that had never before happened.

Look at Hebrews 11:17-19.

17 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, 18 of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." 19 He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

Abraham's faith had grown so much over the years. This test showed him the depth of his faith. Not only did God see the extent of his faith, but Abraham did too. Ball writes, "God gave Abraham a moment that was such a strong personal testimony that he would never doubt, or forget, the faith that he had in the Lord."²

I'm impressed at the faith of Isaac in these verses too. Listen to what Clark Tanner writes about this passage. It is the different viewpoint on the age of Isaac that I mentioned earlier.

"The first century historian, Josephus, is considered even by secular historians and archeologists who are not really interested in the scriptures themselves, to be one of the most accurate historians of all time. Josephus was a Jew who wrote specifically of the history of the Jews; but within the parameters of his study, he was meticulous. Josephus tells us that Isaac was about twenty five years old at the time God gave Abraham instructions for this sacrifice.

This is important to note, since a twenty five year old man could easily have resisted had he been so inclined. This was not a small boy, as is so often portrayed in Sunday School materials and taught to our own children. This was a strong, healthy young man with much of his life yet to come; marriage, children, pursuit of all the usual priorities of this earthly life; yet he willingly carried the wood.

Here is a quote from Josephus, who apparently had documentation available to him that has long since been lost to his posterity, but he recorded it for us in his compiling(s). I've taken the liberty of paraphrasing it slightly for smoother reading and better understanding, but I have not changed the essence. It is Isaac's response to his father's announcement of what God had instructed him to do. According to this historian, Isaac said:

² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

'I was not worthy to be born in the first place, if I would reject the plan and will of God and my own father, and not give myself up willing to both their pleasures. Even if this was the will of you alone, my father, it would be wrong to disobey.' And from there he went immediately up to the altar.

Isaac trusted his father to be obeying God's will, and not only did he go willingly, he carried the wood!

Now, God did not ultimately require such a dear price from Abraham. He stopped Abraham from slaying his son, and provided a ram for the sacrifice; a type of the Christ to come, who would be God's own sacrifice to redeem mankind back to Himself.

But Abraham had passed the test of faith, and Isaac had certainly passed a test of obedience; obedience even to death.

Now turn with me to the gospel of John, chapter 19, verse 17.

'17 and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called The Place of a Skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha.'"³

Both Abraham and Isaac displayed incredible faith in God to do what He said he would. The parallels between Jesus and Isaac carrying the wood are astounding. God's response to Abraham's faith is shown in verses 11-19.

God's Response – vs. 11-19

11 But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." 12 He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." 13 And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. 14 So Abraham called the name of that place, "The LORD will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided."

15 And the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven 16 and said, "By myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, 17 I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, 18 and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice." 19 So Abraham returned to his young men, and they arose and went together to Beersheba. And Abraham lived at Beersheba.

³ http://www.sermoncentral.com/print_friendly.asp?ContributorID=&SermonID=31063, pp. 1-2.

God blessed Abraham and Isaac for their obedience. To read Genesis 22 without the framework of the Gospel narrative would be tragic. We'd miss the true meaning of the text. Abraham was asked to sacrifice his Son, not just to test his faith, but to give us an Old Testament picture of what Christ would do for us in the New Testament. God the Father asked Abraham to do something that He would do Himself. Look again at John 3:16.

16 "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

God's testing of Abraham was a foreshadowing of the gift that he would give us in Jesus. Our salvation required God to make the ultimate sacrifice in giving His son Jesus to us. There was no "out" for God. Jesus is our lamb. The ram that was sacrificed on the altar by Abraham is an Old Testament picture of Jesus. Mount Moriah, the site where Abraham was tested would eventually become the site for Solomon's Temple. In 2 Chronicles 3:1 we read that Solomon built the temple on this mountain. What a perfect place for the glory of the Lord to dwell. It was here that God tested Abraham, and it was here that God provided a lamb to take Isaac's place, and it would be not far from here that Jesus would die on a cross in our place. When God tests, He provides; always!

Like Abraham, and Isaac, you two will be tested by God. Will you take up the wood and lay it on the altar? Will you take up your cross and follow Him?

In Luke 9:23 we read, "23 And he said to all, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.'"

Are you willing to take up your cross and follow God in faithful obedience? When you do, you will find life!