

## Putting to the Test

**Reading: Genesis 22:1-2** “....God tested Abraham....”<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction:**

There are two occasions (that I know of) in the Old Testament where we find a specific account of God either putting, or allowing others to put, individuals to the test regarding their faithfulness. One such account is Job. Job was a man who was “...blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil..” (**Job 1:1**). Satan was aware of Job’s faithfulness to God, but claimed that the only reason why Job was faithful to God was because God had protected and blessed him (**Job 1:9-11**). So God allowed Satan to inflict hardship on Job to test Job’s faithfulness. In the end, even though he questioned God as to why he had to endure the suffering, Job passed the test, and remained true to God (**Job 1: 20-22; 27:1-6**).

The other account of “testing” is the one taken from the above reading concerning Abraham.

Note: The word “*tested*” used here (**Genesis 22:1**) in the New King James Version Bible is sometimes translated as “*tempt*” in other versions. The Hebrew word is “*nacah*”<sup>2</sup>, and means to “*test*”, “*assay*”, “*prove*”, “*tempt*”<sup>3</sup>, “*try*”.

God was about to test the faithfulness of Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his son, Isaac. This was not just a case of a father being prepared to kill his own son in obedience to God. There were special circumstances and promises surrounding Isaac that made this “test” significant.

This lesson will look at what made this “test” significant, and draw some application for us today.

## **LESSON**

### **1) God’s initial promises to Abraham**

#### a) The Land promise

**In Genesis 12:1**, we read that God had instructed Abraham (or “Abram” as he was then known) to leave his home country and go to a foreign land. His home land was Ur of the Chaldeans (**Genesis 11:31**) – located in the area now known as Iraq. Abraham didn’t know where God was taking him, but God had told him that He would give him the land to which he was going as an inheritance (**Hebrews 11:8**). Now Abraham was 75 years old at the time (**Genesis 12:4**), but in spite of his age, in spite of the fact that he was leaving an area that he was familiar with, he obediently followed God’s instruction.

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<sup>1</sup> Acknowledgements to Bill Watkins, Crieve Hall, Nashville, TN, for the basic outline of this lesson.

<sup>2</sup> Strong’s Concordance, Hebrew Word 5254.

<sup>3</sup> **Genesis 22:1** is not a contradiction of **James 1:13** with regard to God tempting anyone. The context of the **James** passage is about temptations leading to sin. The context of **Genesis** is God “proving” the faithfulness of Abraham, just as others had their faith tested centuries later in **1 Peter 1:6-7**.

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At the end of **Genesis 11**, we see that he starts the journey with his father, Terah, his nephew Lot, and his wife, Sarah (then known as Sarai). They came to Haran (in Assyria<sup>4</sup>) and dwelt there for a while. Later, Abraham takes Sarah, Lot and all those of his household, and proceeds to the land of Canaan (**Genesis 12:5**).

### b) The Descendants promise

But the land promise wasn't the only promise that God had made to Abraham. He also promised him that he would have descendants who would become a great nation (**Genesis 12:2**). Now this promise may not seem such a strange thing except for a couple of facts;

- both Abraham and Sarah were old – Abraham was 75, and Sarah was 10 years younger (**Genesis 17:17**), making her 65 at the time of the promise.
- up to this point in time, Sarah had not borne any children. **Genesis 11:30** says that she “*..was barren...*” – usually meaning that she could not have children of her own.

In other words, God was promising descendants to an elderly couple who through the “*prime years of their life*” had not been able to have any children of their own. From man's perspective, God was promising something that was virtually impossible, but after God had repeated His promise (to Abraham) in **Genesis 15:1-6**, Abraham “*....believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness*”.

## 2) Two sons born

### a) Ishmael is born to Hagar

Time passes, but still no child is born to Abraham and Sarah. About 10 years<sup>5</sup> after **Genesis 12**, Sarah decided to help God along a bit with His plan. She offered her hand-maiden, Hagar, to be a surrogate (**Genesis 16:2**). Abraham heeded the words of his wife, and Hagar became pregnant (**16:4**). However, rather than this turning into joy and happiness, quite the opposite happened. When Hagar saw that she was with child by Abraham, she started to despise her mistress, Sarah (**16:4-5**), with the result that there was conflict between the two women (**16:6**).

- perhaps there is a lesson here for us when we feel the need to “hurry up” God in His plans.

But in spite of the fact that Abraham was the father of Ishmael, Ishmael was not the one that God had promised. The descendants that God had promised to Abraham would not be those who come by Ishmael; the descendants of the promise would come by a son through Sarah (**Genesis 17:18-21**).

### b) The son of the promise is born - Isaac

When Abraham was 99 years old, God appeared to him again and told him that He would establish His covenant between Himself and Abraham and his

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<sup>4</sup> About 800km away to the north-west of Ur

<sup>5</sup> **Genesis 16:3**.

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descendant (**Genesis 17:1-7**). After talking about circumcision being the sign of the covenant, and the new names that Sarah and Abraham would have (**17:5, 10-15**), God again reminded him that Sarah would bear a child (**17:16**).

Now this seemed a bit incredible to Abraham, *i.e.* that a 100 year old man would have a child by his 90 year old wife (**17:17**) – so incredible, in fact, that he suggested to God that Ishmael be the one through whom the promises would come (**17:18**). But while some things may seem impossible to man, they are not impossible to God. Sarah would bear a child, a son, and his name would be called Isaac (**17:19**).

True to His Word, God enabled Sarah to have a child – “...*she conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him.*”<sup>6</sup> (**Genesis 21:1-2**).

- the promise was fulfilled in the face of “impossible odds”. Abraham and Sarah has seen God fulfil His promise regarding a son. I guess that they could now see God’s plan all coming together.

### 3) The call to sacrifice Isaac

It was “*after these things*” that God called on Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. (**Genesis 22:1-2**). Abraham had waited 25 years for God’s to fulfil His promise of a child by Sarah<sup>7</sup>. The descendants that were to follow Abraham were to come through Isaac (**Genesis 17:19**), but now God was asking Abraham to offer up Isaac, his “*only son*” (**22:2**) as a burnt offering. Isaac was still “*a lad*” (**22:5**), He had not yet married or had any children of his own. But what God was asking Abraham to do would involve the death of Isaac.

- o how could all these promises that God had made to Abraham about his descendants being as numerous as the stars of heaven (**Genesis 15:5**);
- o His promise that his descendants would inherit the land of Canaan (**Genesis 13:14-15**);
- o how could these things now eventuate if Isaac was to be killed?

Not a lot is recorded in the scriptures as to what was going through Abraham’s mind as he and his son journeyed to the land of Moriah. The journey took at least 3 days (**22:4**)<sup>8</sup>, so he would have had plenty of time to dwell on what God was asking him to do. Those of us who are parents can probably imagine some of the thoughts and moments of anguish that Abraham may have felt

But we do learn some things from the book of **Hebrews** about what Abraham was thinking. In **Hebrews 11:17-19** we read that he concluded “...*that God was*

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<sup>6</sup> In **Genesis 18: 9-14**, the Lord (vs.1) appeared to Abraham and told him when the child would be born.

<sup>7</sup> Abraham was 75 years old when he set out for Canaan and was promised descendants, and Isaac, the son of the promise, was born when Abraham was 100 years old, *i.e.* 25 years later.

<sup>8</sup> From **Genesis 21:31-34**, Abraham was at Beersheba, which is located in southern Canaan. The land of Moriah is believed to be the area around Jerusalem (**2 Chronicles 3:1**), about 60 to 70 kms away.

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*able to raise him (Isaac) up, even from the dead...*". In **Genesis 22:5**, as he left his servants to go on the last part of the journey with Isaac, he told them that "...we<sup>9</sup> will come back to you"(emphasis mine – SK).

As far as we know, Abraham had never seen anyone rise from the dead, but he believed that God could do it. He believed that God would be able to raise Isaac from the dead after being sacrificed, and that God would then fulfil His promise regarding the descendants through Isaac. Therefore, Abraham put his faith into action, and obeyed the Word of the Lord (**Genesis 22:5-10**).

We are all familiar with the account and how it ends. Just as Abraham was about to kill his son, the Lord intervened (**Genesis 22:11-12**) - He stayed the hand of Abraham, and provided a ram for the sacrifice instead of Isaac. Abraham had passed the test. He had perfected his faith in God through his obedience (**James 2:20-23**). As a result, God greatly blessed Abraham, and repeated His promises to him (**Genesis 22:15-18**).

### **Application:**

When God told Abraham to sacrifice his son, there is no record of God also saying to Abraham, "*This is a test, Abraham. I am going to see how faithful you are*". If He had specifically told Abraham that this was just a test, it would have changed the perspective of things. But He didn't. God simply told Abraham what to do, *i.e.* "*Take your son, your only son, and offer him as a burnt offering in the land of Moriah*" (**Genesis 22:2** paraphrased). And in obedience to God's Word, and in spite of the emotional struggle he may have had with this command, Abraham went ahead and did what God asked him to do (until God stopped him at the Last moment).

Today, God has told us what to do through His Word (**2 Timothy 3:16-17**; **2 Peter 1:2-3**). There are some things that we may not understand (**2 Peter 3:16a**). There are some things that may not seem to make sense to us (**Acts 9:10-14**). But we don't have to fully understand God's reasons every time. We just need to learn to trust Him (**1 Timothy 4:10**), and do what He asks (**Luke 6:46**).

God doesn't (specifically) tell us with every command, "*This is a test of your faithfulness*". He just reveals in His Word what He wants us to do, and how He wants us to live our lives each day (**Ephesians 5:8-10**).

But when you think about it, every command that we have from God is a test – a test of our faithfulness (**Revelation 2:10b**); a test of our love for Him (**John 14:15**); and a test of our obedience (**1 John 5:2-3**).

- when God says to us, "*Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth...*" (**Ephesians 4:29a**), but we feel like cursing and swearing when we get angry, we are being tested.
- when God says to us, "*Forgive one another, even as God in Christ forgave you...*" (**Ephesians 4:32b**), but we feel that the person who has offended us has hurt us too much, we are being tested.

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<sup>9</sup> Text from the New King James Version Bible.

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- when God says to us to grow in “...longsuffering...patience.....self control....” (**Galatians 5:22-23; 1 Thessalonians 5:14b**), but we feel that some people just get under our skin too much, we are being tested.
- When God says, “*Desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby*” (1 Peter 2:2), but we would much rather do other things than spend some time in God’s Word each day, we are being tested.

Abraham was not a perfect man;

- he twice “bent the truth” to others about his wife Sarah (*i.e.* he lied) (**Genesis 12:10-19; 20:1-13**)
- he assisted Sarah in her plan to “help God out a bit” in providing an heir (**Genesis 16:1-4**).

But overall, he had an obedient faith, a great trust in God, “...and it was accounted to him for righteousness,...and he was called the friend of God” (**James 2:23**).

We can be like Abraham. The odds are pretty certain that God will not require us to offer up any of our children as a burnt offering. But there will be other challenges each day – some big, some small. Each one of those challenges will be a test of our faithfulness. There will be times when we will fail – but God can take care of that (**1 John 1:7**). But let us use each test to defeat Satan (**James 4:7**), and to strengthen and fortify our faith and trust in the Lord (**1 Peter 1:6-7**).